

An Attempt At Constructing A Definition of Ethics And Business Ethics

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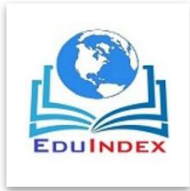
Abstract

Definitions are ways of representing meanings of terms in different ways, senses and contexts. There are basically two categories of definitions - intentional and extensional, which respectively stress on inner logical or formal meaning and to the applicability or range of exemplification. The first type may be more natural to mathematics, logic and the sciences (which is not to say that the second type do not at all apply to the sciences) but the second type may, at times be, easier to apply in the social sciences, arts and value theories. We are also well aware of the limitations and fallacies of definitions. Definitions are attempts at finding meanings of words, but meanings are more than definitions. A definition is a strict and formal attempt at expressing a meaning, but a meaning includes less strict and informal attempts as well. Secondly meaning itself is a very difficult issue. The meaning of meaning is one of the most baffling philosophical problems and the existence and continuing research at generating different theories of meaning proves this. In this context, framework and with relation to this state of affairs, finding the meaning of ethics and business ethics becomes a tremendously difficult task. An attempt will be made to simplify this task and solve this puzzle by providing synthetic definitions of ethics and business ethics, along with stressing their essential aspects. Business ethics is perhaps the most important and inclusive example of applied ethics and therefore understanding the meaning, scope and usefulness of business ethics becomes very important in this age of economics and also because of so many complex reasons man is faced with more ethical problems and dilemmas than ever before.

Keywords: *Meaning, Definition, ethics, business ethics, Metaethics, normative ethics, applied ethics, social sciences.*

DEFINITIONS

Definitions are intellectual puzzles and challenges and are in a sense akin to creating a perfect piece of art. They try to reduce the essential meaning of some term to words in a logical, formal manner and exhaustive manner. And therein lies an important problem of definitions. They create complex and even more complex expressions which are related to words and other complex expressions in a definition



in multiple ways which can be understood and interpreted in many ways. Every new word in a definition expands its meaning manifold.

The Oxford dictionary defines definition as “an exact statement or description of the nature, scope, or meaning of something” and the Merriam-Webster defines it as “a statement expressing the essential nature of something”.

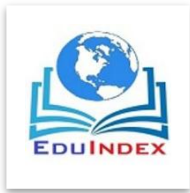
Definitions are a chapter and topic in logic and there are many well-known fallacies and limitations of definitions. The most common and well known is the problem of circularity which is not completely avoidable. Here the term that is defined is used in its own definition. For example business ethics can be defined circularly as being ethical in businesses. This is a mere tautology and adds nothing to our knowledge of business ethics. The second fallacy is incongruity or being too limited and narrow or being too wide and broad. Narrow definitions miss out on details (sometimes essential ones), on the totality, aspects, characteristics, uses, contexts, meanings etc. Wide definitions take away the exactitude, the rigour and make it extremely complex along with an invitation for multiple meanings and interpretations and for confusing the meaning of the term under definition with other terms. The third fallacy of definitions is the presence of obscurity and ambiguity and/or use of metaphors, figurative language while defining which again can be interpreted differently and take out the rigour from the definition. Fourthly, the terms a definition uses to define something themselves require definitions of words which form a part of the definition, which further require definitions of their constituent words and so till infinity (or which can be avoided by being circular) on thus, a certain degree of doubt and obscurity are almost impossible to eliminate. Fifthly, defining beyond a limit becomes linguistically very difficult or even impossible or requires or to be circular to some degree or forces us to assume some meanings without defining them.

Definitions can be nominal or real. Real definitions are a definition of a thing as they is in reality, they tend to be technically exact and capture the essence. Nominal definitions are not that exact, they are more like dictionary definitions, they try to describe or list properties.

Defining is either giving the meaning of words or other linguistic things, which is called "nominal definition" or clarifying a given meaning, which is a proposition or property or relation, by showing it to be a compound of other propositions or properties or relations, which is called "real definition". The claim that the word "bachelor" means an unmarried male is a nominal definition and the thing defined is the word "bachelor". The definition gives the meaning of the thing defined, and the meaning is the property it expresses, the sense of the term.¹

A nominal definition is how one describes a thing in words of a language especially the properties that can be empirically perceived. A real definition goes beyond such properties and considers the centrality.

John Locke distinguished, in his *Essay*, “real essence” from “nominal essence.” Nominal essence, according to Locke, is the “*abstract Idea to which the Name is*



annexed (III.vi.2).” Thus, the nominal essence of the name ‘gold’, Locke said, “is that complex *Idea* the word *Gold* stands for, let it be, for instance, a Body yellow, of a certain weight, malleable, fusible, and fixed.” In contrast, the real essence of gold is “the constitution of the insensible parts of that Body, on which those Qualities [mentioned in the nominal essence] and all other Properties of *Gold* depend (III.vi.2).” A rough way of marking the distinction between real and nominal definitions is to say, following Locke, that the former states real essence, while the latter states nominal essence. The chemist aims at real definition, whereas the lexicographer aims at nominal definition.²

Intensional definitions are formal definitions which bring out the essential features and not probable features, without committing logical fallacies (and stressing ontological relations between terms) and stress on positive not negative properties of the term under consideration. Such definitions give no extra details and may give origin and synonyms of the term and the necessary and sufficient conditions.

Intensional definitions can be:

1. Lexical – dictionary, reporting, general commonly understood, in terms of a language,
2. Stipulative definition is one which gives a new meaning a new specific meaning, in a context.
3. Precise definitions are totally unambiguous, logical and the terms inside the definition are themselves clearly defined.
4. A theoretical definition where there is a generalization not exactly fully precise or complete
5. Expressing emotions, attitudes and persuasions, imaginations, personal or cultural

Extensional definitions

The second category of definitions are extensional definitions.

These are extended definitions and through examples they pointing the thing or object which is being defined. These definition focus on the belief that examples may do a better job than words, so they may list all possible examples of a term.



Two more ideas associated with definitions and meanings are connotations and denotations.

According to the Oxford Dictionary: **Connote** - (of a word) imply or suggest (an idea or feeling) in addition to the literal or primary meaning.

Connotation - In linguistics and literary theory, a 'secondary' (often emotional) meaning (or a range of associations) evoked by a word beyond its explicit denotation or dictionary meaning. Such meanings may be implied by the writer or speaker and/or inferred by the reader or listener.

Denotation

Again according to the Oxford Dictionary:

The literal or primary meaning of a word, in contrast to the feelings or ideas that the word suggests, the action of indicating or referring to something by means of a word, symbol, etc. When we denote we give example of the object or concept to which a term refers, or the set of objects of which a predicate is true.

The explicit, surficial, literal dictionary meaning of a word or expression, with reference to the entity or thing that the word designates.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DEFINITIONS AND MEANING

Definitions are in the form of statements and are formal meanings. They try to give general and universal meanings in form of words. Single definition for a single word. But there can be different types of definitions. Meanings are ideas, can be informal, in daily usage, in contexts, subjective, in form of artistic expressions and actions apart from words and one word can have multiple meanings. In this paper we would attempt to both define and understand the meanings of ethics and business ethics.

THEORIES OF MEANING

There are many theories of meaning are many:

1. Locke's Ideational theory – Thoughts or ideas about something.
2. Behaviour theories - the meaning of an expression, as uttered on a particular occasion, is either (1) the behavioural stimulus that produces the utterance, (2) the behavioural response that the utterance produces, or (3) a combination of both³.
3. Russell's reference theory which associate meaning with the thing or object referred to.



4. Possible world semantics in which meaning of something consists of its meanings in some or all possible worlds or truth values in some and all possible worlds.

5. Verificationism - The basic idea underlying verificationism is that meaning results from links between language and experience.⁴ Verificationists (motivated by logical positivism) consider only the empirically verifiable facts or logical truths to be true.

6. Frege stressed on two elements of meaning, reference and sense or the which together contribute to the meaning. The reference of an expression is the actual thing corresponding to it, in the case of "the morning star", the reference is the planet Venus itself. The sense of an expression, however, is the "mode of presentation" or cognitive content associated with the expression in virtue of which the reference is picked out⁵.

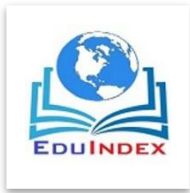
7. The British philosopher Paul Grice and his followers hoped to explain meaning solely in terms of beliefs and other mental states. Grice's suggestion was that the meaning of a sentence can be understood in terms of a speaker's intention to induce a belief in the hearer by means of the hearer's recognition of that intention⁶.

8. Tarski and Davidson's attempts to understand meaning through truth conditions of sentences or more precisely of propositions which sentences represent.

9. Conceptual role semantics - According to that approach, the meaning of an expression for a speaker is the same as its conceptual role in the speaker's mental life. Roughly speaking, the conceptual role of an expression is the sum of its contributions to inferences that involve sentences containing that expression.⁷

If we try and construct a composite, integrated and synthetic understanding of meaning we can see that each one of these theories looks upon an aspect of meaning. But the totality of meaning would be a (very intelligent and careful) synthesis of all these. Meanings have definite associations with ideas, beliefs, mental states (and other mental states) and conceptual roles in minds and of people. There is also some merit in deriving meanings through behaviours both which cause the use of the term or sentence and the behaviours that result from it. For physical objects references and verification make sense. A very interesting idea is the idea of what might or could have been, i.e. what possible worlds can be or could have been and meanings are functions of possible worlds as well. Both reference and sense are essential to meanings. In addition, truth conditions also contribute to meaning and most strongly contribute it to in certain cases.

It may here be agreed upon that meanings are subjective, inter-subjective and objective. Subjectively meanings are ideas, beliefs, and mental states. Objectively, physical objects can be defined in terms of the sciences and logical truth are self-defined and truth conditions can be invoked for definiteness in meaning. Problems arise in case of values, abstract concepts & ideas, emotions, actions behaviours, attitudes social and cultural expressions. But there are inter-subjective agreements in cases on many of these.



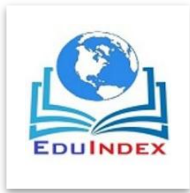
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCIENCES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CONTEXT OF DEFINITIONS

Definitions in social sciences and arts are not only very difficult but also reach and challenge the limits of human minds, rationality and language. Whereas in mathematics and in the sciences there is precision, exactitude, clear logical theories and laws and measurement and expression in terms of mathematics.

In social sciences there may be ambiguities, subjectivities and disagreements both as there are many philosophical schools or worldviews through which lead to different lines of thought and different conclusions and also as there are differences in interpretations, meanings, importance given to different aspects and essences. Secondly social sciences are heavily context dependent. The differences in historical settings, cultures and beliefs may lead to relativistic understandings. There is stress in social sciences on meanings of phenomenon and social actions rather pure cause and effects in the sciences. According to many our social worlds are nothing but human constructions unlike the physical worlds which are universal and factual. In social sciences there is either a holistic perspective or an individualistic perspective, unlike the sciences where phenomenon are considered separately and distinctly and also objectively rather than subjectively. In the social sciences there is a greater role of emotions and human irrationality. In addition there may be some inexplicable brute facts and brute stuff which may not have further reasons or explanations in case of both sciences and social sciences. In the social sciences reduction to logic of social phenomenon or human phenomenon may at times be difficult and even impossible, In the social sciences experiments may be difficult and practically impossible at other times. The social worlds are dynamic, without absolute fixed laws and fixed generalizations. In sciences explanations, theories and laws could be true or false, in social sciences there are degrees and dimensions of truth and falsity.

Again these sciences of society are based more on statistics, statistical inferences and probabilities than the pure sciences and purely physical phenomenon. Sciences at least in laws and theories are value free but here the importance of ethics and values is much more. They study interactions between humans and humans and other variables and qualities rather than physical interactions. Social sciences describe more at times than explain but the sciences explain more than they describe. Another important distinction between the two is that intelligent imaginations play a greater role in the social sciences. Sciences are very systematic but the social sciences may be less organized and systematic due to all these reasons.

In humanities and social sciences there is much more freedom and the different, and the minutest and slightest aspects, characterizations, conceptualization and ideas of concepts and phenomenon, natural or contrived are given a place and even



importance and all aspects of complexity of a thing whether clear or unclear, whether precise or imprecise are included in their subject matter, research or study.

In humanities and subjects like philosophy these un-science like characteristics become even more prominent. Imagination, speculation, subjectivity, deep and wide characterization, intellectualization and rationalism (as opposed to empiricism) abstractness, thought experiments, imprecision, probabilities, conceptuality, metaphysical issues, interpretations, meanings, meaningfulness, expressionism, literary use of language, literary devices, holism, synthesis, stress on values both ethical and aesthetic, contextualism take a front seat more in case of continental philosophy as do analysis of language and logic in case of analytic philosophy as (to a reasonable extent) opposed to observation, empiricism, fixed laws, inductive logic, cause and effect, repeatability, mathematical relations and precision, experimentation in controlled conditions, falsifiability in the case of the sciences.

Ethics and business ethics are areas of humanities and social sciences and are possessed of these characteristics.

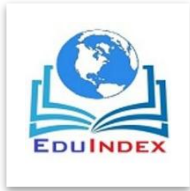
ETHICS AND BUSINESS ETHICS

Defining ethics and business ethics are philosophical and semantic problems and in the case of most definitions but, more so because ethics and business ethics are philosophical terms and very components of value theory. Values are amongst the intellectually most difficult of philosophical topics.

ETHICS

At the onset it can be said that ethics is a branch of philosophy, more specifically of value theory and it is synonymous with moral philosophy. Secondly it is academic discipline a branch of knowledge. In addition ethics is either itself or is an examination, study, understanding and exploration into meanings of morality, moral standards, duties, obligations, principles and theories. It tries to define and explain good, bad, right wrong, justice, injustice, moral correctness and incorrectness in theory and practice for individuals, institutions, groups and systems, societies countries and humanity as a whole in actions, attitudes, conduct and in behaviour. For some ethics would be a guiding philosophy For others it would be the voice of their conscience and/or consciousness (comprised on concepts and feeling) of moral importance of intuitive good or right distinguishing it from wrong and bad. Ethics also studies moral consequences of human actions. Therefore ethics is:

1. An academic discipline, sub-field of philosophy. Its sub fields include metaethics, normative ethics, applied ethics, descriptive ethics.
2. It is a philosophical, theoretical and practical study of morality, moral concepts, moral values, principles, rules, morality in living and life, conduct and behaviour of individuals, groups, institutions, systems, societies and humanity as a whole.



3. Same as moral philosophy and it tries to develop moral theories and suggest solutions to practical moral problems.
4. Ethics can be contextual and relative, i.e. pertaining to a historical period, a social group, according to a situation system of values for a society, or subjective for an individual.

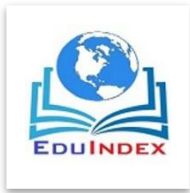
METAETHICS, NORMATIVE ETHICS AND APPLIED ETHICS

Metaethics:

1. Is a branch of analytic philosophy (which involves a logical and linguistic analysis of moral language and concepts) but continental philosophers also involve themselves in metaethics in some ways
2. It is philosophizing about ethics.
3. It questions the foundations and existence of ethics
4. In addition it studies the status, characteristics, nature, meanings, scope of ethics, ethical theories, ethical values, beliefs, thoughts, properties, words, talks, facts, sentences, standards, systems and practice and the study of the philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology semantics and psychological aspects, beliefs assumptions, and of all these.
5. Objectivity and subjectivity of ethics, ethical theories and concepts and whether it is cognizable or not and whether it is relative and contextual or not.

Normative ethics:

1. Is the exploration and construction of ethical theories and criteria and basis of right, wrong, good, bad, justice, injustice and such other ethical terms and thus giving answers to ethical questions concerning action.
2. Finding or constructing moral standards, rules and principles and if at all the fundamental principle(s), rule(s) and standard(s) and the morality of institutions, groups, actions, behaviour, ways of life and conducts in theoretical terms.
3. A study into ethics of virtues, character traits and characters.
4. Some of the main theories of ethics are:
 - A. Deontology
 - B. Consequentialism – utilitarianism, altruism, egoism,
 - C. Virtue ethics



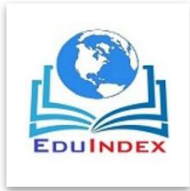
Applied ethics

Application of ethical theories and principles to solving practical, everyday life problems, to particular and specific ethical issues like affirmative action, abortion, business ethics, euthanasia, animal rights, cloning, capital punishment, value of nature, immigration, bioethics, genethics, professional ethics etc.

BUSINESS ETHICS:

1. It is a branch or sub area of ethics, especially of applied ethics but definitely involves metaethical and normative studies and aspects as well.
2. It studies, analyses examines ethical dimension, interaction of business and ethics or ethical issues related to businesses and tries to find solutions to and solve ethical problems of and for businesses, in context of businesses or inter and intra business (and stakeholders) or environmental variables.
3. It applies to all business activities, functions and functional areas – decision making planning, organizing, leading motivating, communicating, controlling and marketing finance, accounting, business law, operations, strategies, information technology management etc.
4. It finds justification for systems of socio-economic justice, socio economic systems themselves, systems of exchange and the parts, sub-parts, structures and practices of these systems.
5. It concentrates on case studies, practices, ethical structuring of business organizations and systems and metaethics of corporations, systems, structures and practices
6. Business ethics applies to business organizations and other related organizations and institutions and institutional stakeholders; business systems and other associated and related socio economic and political systems and individual stakeholders of businesses and entrepreneurial ecosystems. It concentrates on morality of individuals, of enterprises and of systems.
7. Some areas of study for business ethics are corporate corruption, insider trading, environmental pollution, ecological degradation, employee employer relations, discrimination, affirmative action, employee compensation, competition, advertising, working conditions, relations between other stakeholders, corporate social responsibility, corporate governance, whistleblowing etc.

There are metaethical problems in constructing definitions of ethics and until and unless there are agreements on such metaethical issues going further becomes very difficult. First we will have to decide whether we can be ethical nihilists or not. If ethical nihilism is agreed upon, further deliberations on ethics and business ethics lose meaning. Therefore, we will have to disagree to ethical nihilism.



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Secondly, the states of ethical realism or moral facts would have to be agreed to. If there are moral facts exist (or ethical realism is true) then ethics much more importantly becomes their study and truth semantic theories of meaning apply to ethics.

Thirdly, If there is merit to ethical relativism ethics and business ethics to some extent must be defined relatively and according to contexts. But it will not be very wise to think that ethical relativism can be justified in all cases and at all times.

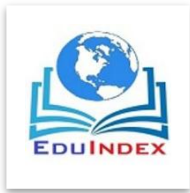
Fourthly if the non-cognitivists are true then ethical statements do not have propositional content and are emotional and prescriptive utterances and thus the more subjective meanings and to some extent inter subjective agreements become more important in contrast to objectivity. But ethics can be considered to contain cognitive content if not objectively then at least subjectively which means that there can be ethical propositions expressing subjective truths.

Fifthly if ethical naturalism applies and mind, mental properties and thus ethics and business ethics are in some way results of natural properties or natural in some sense or supervene upon the natural then ethics becomes, in its core, an extension of the natural sciences. But the leap from natural to social sciences is very difficult and requires developing very detailed and unexplored connections. Therefore, even if ethical naturalism is finally true, definitions of ethics and business ethics will have to focus on the more apparent, available and surficial obvious sense and characteristics of ethics, i.e. its status as a social science.

Sixthly, moral particularism also makes some sense, as contexts, situations and understandings contribute to ethics, but it will again be unwise to say that, ethical principles cannot at all be general and universal in at least some limited way if not totally.

Seventhly, according to many ethics is basically derived from the Divine, his perfectly benevolent will. If we believe so then ethics would have areas common with theology, spirituality and religion.

These metaethical - metaphysical, epistemological and semantic claims and points of view and their opposites can lead to different conceptions of ethics and business ethics. We would take a synthetic view of the ethics and device a metaethical understanding based on such a view. We would disagree to moral nihilism, but agree to both realists and anti-realists, cognitivists and non-cognitivists, relativist and anti-relativists and also to naturalists and non-naturalists partially.



For us there are at least some universally acceptable ethical principles and statements, but there is merit to ethical subjectivism and relativism well. Secondly, ethics is derived both from reason, intuition and emotion. Thirdly, there is propositional content in some ethical statements and others have emotional content as well. Mind and body, brain and mind, physical and non-physical, spirit and matter all contribute to ethics.

Let us then concentrate on the meaning of ethics according to the theories of meaning discussed earlier.

1. Meanings have definite associations with ideas, beliefs, mental states (and other mental states) and conceptual roles in minds and of people - In case of ethics and business ethics their meanings would be contributed by ideas, beliefs and mental states of both thinkers, those who utter and listeners and the conceptual role they play in their and others' minds. But until and unless there are very precise and well founded intersubjective agreements, a universal definition of ethics becomes difficult.

2. There is also some merit in deriving meanings through behaviours both which cause the use of the term or sentence and the behaviours that result from it – A behavioural meaning of ethics and business ethics could be constructed by equating observed behaviours with conceptions of ethical behaviours or certain behaviours could be benchmarked for being ethical. But if no foundational basis for being ethical is assumed then there is always a danger of falling for the fallacy of cyclical reasoning. Secondly, the limited, doubtful and rough relation between behaviour and use of a term or sentence (on which this behavioural theory is based) gives birth to many more questions.

3. For physical objects references and verification make sense – but for fields of study like ethics a referential and verificationist point of view would not make sense. Ethics and business ethics are abstract ideas, concepts and their verification like physical objects would not be possible, but inter-subjective agreements of such ideas and concepts are possible. If ethics and business ethics are looked upon as a set of conducts or behaviours then verification and reference would make more sense. But a behavioural understanding of ethics has many more problems of its own. Verification of subjective character traits or attitudes or mental states can be done by the concerned person himself subjectively. But such introspection cannot at all be termed verification in the sense the term has been used. It could be considered verification in a very special sense only.

A very interesting idea is the idea of what might or could have been, i.e. what possible worlds can be or could have been and meanings are functions of possible worlds as well – and even more interesting would be imagining possible world ethics. If there is some merit in ethical realism then there would be some ethical statements that would be true in all possible worlds or many possible worlds. But according to the ethical relativists and subjectivists there are so many possible worlds with different conceptions, meanings and definitions of ethics.



Both reference and sense are essential to meanings. But the sense of ethics carries more weight than its reference.

In addition, truth conditions also contribute to meaning and most strongly contribute it to in certain cases like in the case of facts.

A BACKGROUND TO DEFINING ETHICS AND BUSINESS ETHICS

A nominal definition of ethics and business ethics would be close to a dictionary definition. For example – Ethics is a subfield of philosophy which studies morality, moral theories and practices. Business ethics is the study and application of morality in and for businesses.

A real definition of ethics and business ethics would be very difficult. The same would apply to precise definitions.

An intentional definitions of ethics would be a theoretical definition as opposed to other categories of intensional definitions.

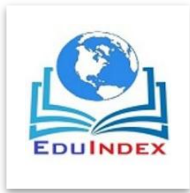
An extensional definition for ethics and business ethics would not make complete sense as ethics and business ethics are not physically demonstrable and examples of philosophers doing ethics or business organizations actually dealing with ethical as examples of ethics and business ethics or ethical practices would do them a limited justice in explanation.

An interesting idea associated with ethics would be a connotative meaning of ethics. There are supporters of non-cognitivism in ethics who believe that ethical statements do not express propositions or features of the world and therefore cannot be true or false. Instead they express emotions or prescriptions. Connotative definitions of ethics and business ethics would someone's personal emotional conception of ethics. The first two categories above could see examples of defining or conceptualizing ethics in connotatively.

A denotative meaning and definition of ethics would be quite close to a nominal definition of ethics.

A stipulative definition of ethics and business ethics would apply to situations, persons and contexts and as we are attempting a more general definition stipulative definitions would only be of limited interest to us.

The best course of action would then be to construct a descriptive and theoretical definition of ethics and business ethics which categorizes these terms in different categories and contexts and tries to characterize it in terms of answers to questions like what and why in connection with the terms in question, i.e. what is ethics, why is it needed. The definition will consider a synthesis of the theories of meanings to be relevant to these definitions along with the context of social sciences for ethics and



business ethics. Thirdly, it will also stress on a consensus of different metaethical foundations of ethics, rather than support any one of them.

DEFINITIONS

Ethics can be defined in three ways –

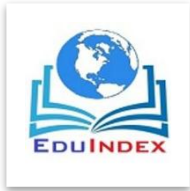
1. Meanings, conceptions and emotions related with morality of individuals and activities behaviour and conducts of such individuals based on these.
2. Meanings, conceptions and emotions related with morality of groups (institutions, religious groups, business organization etc.).
3. A field of study, academic discipline and a sub field of philosophy also known as moral philosophy.

Ethics is an academic discipline, sub-field of philosophy and social science which subjectively, inter-subjectively and objectively, emotionally and rationally identifies, explores, studies, examines, understands, systematizes and explains meanings (in terms of beliefs, mental states, conceptual roles, possibilities, senses and behaviours), characteristics, relations, aspects of morality (good, bad, right wrong justice, injustice etc.), moral expressions, moral principles, standards, duties, problems, imaginations and theories for individuals, institutions, groups and systems, societies, countries and humanity as a whole in conception, thoughts, actions, attitudes, conduct and in behaviour.

Business ethics (in context of the above definition of ethics) is sub field of ethics and applied ethics which concentrates, examines and studies meta ethical, normative, descriptive and applied aspects and issues of morality of businesses, business systems, processes, activities, decisions, environment, relations, affects, extensions and contexts and tries to offer solutions to such practical problems that arise in relation to these.

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