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## **Morality and Ethics: An Introduction**

By Stephen M. Perle, DC, MS

Morality and ethics are terms often used as if they have the same meaning. At other times, they are used as if they have no relationship to one another. I think most people realize ethics and morality have something to do with the concepts of good and bad. However, English is not like French, which has the *Académie Française* acting as its linguistic jury - establishing what is proper French. English changes at the whim of the populous. One can bomb (especially in stand-up comedy), and that's bad, but if one is the bomb (e.g., "Gee, you're swell!"), that's good.

The word "morality" has been co-opted by groups, such as the Moral Majority, making us think morality only deals with acts these religious groups think aren't proper, or are therefore immoral. If you ask people to define "immoral," generally they will give an answer that has to do with sex.

The meanings of the terms "ethics" and "morality" can be differentiated based on their origins in ancient Greek and Latin, respectively. We know that the foundations of Western philosophy came from the ancient Greeks. Thus, if one were to use a single term to describe the Greeks, it would be "philosophers."

On the other hand, the ancient Romans developed many of the techniques used in architecture, so much of their work still stands. Hence, one might describe the Romans as builders. As a result, words that come into the English language from the Greeks often have meanings that are primarily philosophical study, while the Latin-derived words imply "doing the thing."

**Ethics** comes from the Greek word *ethos* - moral character or custom. Morality comes from the Latin word *moralis* - custom or manner. The words both deal with the customs or the manner in which people do things. Their modern meanings relate to the way people act - either good or bad.

**Morality**, strictly speaking, is used to refer to what we would call moral conduct or standards. Morality is looking at how good or bad our conduct is, and our standards about conduct. Ethics is used to refer to the

formal study of those standards or conduct. Sometimes, one refers to the study of conduct as moral philosophy, but that is less common than just saying "ethics." Hence, in most chiropractic colleges, there is an ethics class, rather than one named "morality." One might say that morality is ethics in action, but in the end, the two terms can be used interchangeably. The study of ethics or moral philosophy can be divided into three broad areas: descriptive, normative and analytical (or metaethics).

**Descriptive ethics** is simply describing how people behave. For example, people might say that they think that stealing is bad, but descriptive ethics might tell us, from observing these people, that they may have "downloaded" hundreds of media (in such forms as .mp3 audio or .bmp image) files from file-sharing programs on the Internet. Descriptive ethics let us see if we "walk the walk," and if we are just rationalizing our way past our own moral beliefs.

Sometimes it takes an unbiased observer to point out to us where we are not meeting our own standards. For some, discovering the hypocrisy might just get us to change what we say is good or bad, and adopt and lessen our professed moral code to fit our actions. Hopefully, descriptive ethics can lead to some moral self-reflection and an improvement in our own behavior.

**Normative ethics** tries to establish norms or typical appropriate behaviors people should perform. In ethics class, I call these the "shoulda,' gotta,' needa,' hafta' do" things. One should be honest; in the language of ethics, this is called "veracity." We know that as health care providers, we should strive to help our patients; this is called beneficence. "Above all, do no harm" (or, as Hippocrates wrote: "*primum non nocere*") is called "nonmaleficence" in ethics (not "nonmalfeasance"). Fairness, or justice, is another norm. Gratitude and reparations are often mentioned.

**Metaethics** often looks at how people determine for themselves what norms to follow. I think all parents would agree with me that they have a significant impact on what their children grow up to believe are right and wrong actions. There are many other sources of people's personal ethical beliefs. Generally, we learn good behaviors from our teachers and our religions. In fact, despite all the strife due to religions, the commonality is that they teach norms. The Ten Commandments, for example, is basically a list of norms. For better, or often, for worse, our ethics are also influenced by our peers, and our culture, as seen through the media. Lastly, we have the ability to make changes through moral self-reflection.

What roles do guilt and fear play in ethics? They are the two great guardians of the "straight and narrow." Some maintain their conduct within accepted ethical norms because of the fear of getting caught. These people often do whatever they think that they can "get away with." If they know they are not being watched and are unlikely to get caught, they will violate almost any ethical norm. Of course, if they are a bit paranoid or "chicken," they will not stray, as they are not prepared to follow the criminal's dictum: "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time."

Guilt, on the other hand, is the motivator of honest people. Their decision to comply with ethical norms is not based on whether they will get caught, but because they will know that they did something they think is wrong. Sociopaths do not feel guilt because they do not believe their actions are wrong. Ultimately, those who feel guilt as children decide to be "good" because they don't want to feel guilty again. As they get older, being good becomes a habit.

Consequently, teaching ethics in chiropractic college is not about giving someone a sense of guilt, so that he or she becomes a moral person; I think it takes a real life-altering event to do that. Teaching ethics is about exposing students to the norms of chiropractic and descriptive ethics of our profession, so they can, as the final line in our chiropractic oath says, "Enjoy life and the practice of the chiropractic healing art, respected by all people at all times."

*Stephen Perle, DC, MS*

*Bridgeport, Connecticut*

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