Research in Ethics

The field of ethics has traditionally been a sub-discipline of philosophy. Philosophy, from the Greek terms, “love of wisdom,” is the study of our most basic or general concepts. Research in philosophy aims at clarifying these concepts, and understanding their relations. Good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, are among the basic concepts of ethics.

Other fields of research study the concepts of ethics also; for example, religion and anthropology. These studies typically use methods different from philosophy.

Three Divisions of Ethics

1. *Applied Ethics* is a relatively new division of ethics (late 20th century). This field of research applies methods of philosophical reasoning in order to solve controversial, often publically debated ethical issues.

   Philosophers working in applied ethics contribute research for solving controversies such as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and other matters of life and death.

   Applied ethics also extends to ethical problems encountered in various professions. Among them are health care, law, and business.

2. *Normative Ethics* is what we have studied primarily in this class. Normative ethics concentrates broadly on ethical or moral theory, in order to establish the basis for our knowledge of right and wrong.

   Research in normative ethics focuses primarily on a small set of alternative theoretical models for ethics, such as utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, contract theory, and virtue theory.

3. *Meta-ethics* is the study of common assumptions about ethics that are usually not derived from any particular theory in normative ethics.

   “What is meant by the term ‘good’?” is an example a question in meta-ethics. Others are: “Should we assume moral principles are common for everyone, or that they can vary in different times and places?” and “Does knowing that you ought, morally to do so something always give you a motive or a reason to; if so, what would it be?”
Philosophical Writing

Philosophers at least since Plato (427-347, B.C.) have done most of their philosophical work in writing. (Socrates, Plato’s teacher, did not write anything.) In writing about basic philosophical concepts, philosophers use logical arguments, or reasoning, to demonstrate why their views are correct.

Professional philosophers, who today almost always work as philosophy professors, present their research in three forms:

1. Short research papers for presentation to other philosophers at conferences.
2. Longer essays for publication in scholarly journals, often with lower than 10% acceptance rate.

Good research in philosophy is original, clearly written, logical, persuasive, and contributes to our understanding of a variety of concepts.

Philosophy professors at universities are usually expected to spend 40% of their time during the academic year working on research.

Education in Philosophy

The long process of becoming a professional philosopher begins by taking introductory philosophy classes, followed by advanced classes, and majoring in philosophy. In advanced classes, philosophy majors make their first attempts at philosophical writing, with term papers.

Graduate study in philosophy (after the B.A.) takes five to seven years, or more. This involves much more philosophical study and writing, in every class, and terminates with a book-length writing project called a “dissertation.” Successful graduate students earn a Ph.D. in philosophy.

A Career in Philosophy (not recommended)

Philosophy Ph.D.s compete for teaching positions at colleges and universities. There are, on average, more than 200 applicants for each position.

New philosophy teachers undergo a six-year probationary period. If they manage to publish enough research, and teach well enough, they can be awarded “permanent tenure.” Otherwise, their employment will end. “Tenure” means they cannot easily be fired, so long as their teaching and research output continue satisfactorily.