Ethics, sometimes known as moral philosophy, is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. Philosophical ethics investigates what is the best way for humans to live, and what kinds of actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances. Ethics may be divided into three major areas of study:

- **Meta-ethics**, about the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions and how their truth values (if any) may be determined
- **Normative ethics**, about the practical means of determining a moral course of action
- **Applied ethics** draws upon ethical theory in order to ask what a person is obligated to do in some very specific situation, or within some particular domain of action (such as business)

Ethics seeks to resolve questions dealing with human morality—concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime.

Standard definitions of ethics have typically included such phrases as “the science of the ideal human character” or “the science of moral duty”. Richard William Paul and Linda Elder define ethics as "a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures". The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy states that the word ethics is "commonly used interchangeably with 'morality' ... and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual." Paul and Elder state that most people confuse ethics with behaving in accordance with social conventions, religious beliefs and the law and don't treat ethics as a stand-alone concept.

Normative ethics is the study of ethical action. It is the branch of ethics that investigates the set of questions that arise when considering how one ought to act, morally speaking. Traditionally, normative ethics (also known as moral theory) was the study of what makes actions right and wrong. These theories offered an overarching moral principle one could appeal to in resolving difficult moral decisions.

Applied ethics is a discipline of philosophy that attempts to apply ethical theory to real-life situations. The discipline has many specialized fields, such as engineering ethics, bioethics, public service ethics, business ethics, and of course, computer science ethics. Applied ethics is used in some aspects of determining public policy, as well as by individuals facing difficult decisions.

Computer Science ethics is a branch of applied ethics where increasingly clusters of problems and issues arise that raise new moral dilemmas and to which we must apply our best moral judgments.

Computer technology and its uses is an area where incredible change has occurred over the last forty years. All of our lives have been changed by its introduction and spread. It has changed the way we do business, how we work, how we shop, how governments and businesses store and analyze data, etc.. These changes directly affect our privacy, our livelihood, and perhaps our freedom.

The most pressing questions in computer ethics are related to:
• Invasion of privacy
• Questions of ownership of intellectual property
• Professional responsibility
• Computer reliability (especially in dangerous situations)
• Computer crimes (embezzlement, software theft, malware and actual crimes against computers
• Changing work environment
• Cyberterrorism
• Insidious threats of government control (as envisioned by Orwell's 1984)

We may face new problems created by computer technology, most unlike any faced in the past, but the foundations of sound ethical judgment should be applicable to these as well.

Four Categories of Computer Ethics

1. Computer technology may **aggravate** certain traditional ethical problems (e.g., new ways to invade privacy).
2. Computer technology may **transform** familiar ethical problems into “analogous but unfamiliar ones” (e.g., the criteria for owning an “original” (photo, document, music)).
3. Computer technology may **create new problems** that are unique to the computing realm (e.g., computers making battlefield decisions without human intervention).
4. In some rare cases, computer technology may **relieve** existing moral problems (e.g., computer analysis may allow a more accurate projection of future consequences of difficult choices).