

## PHI220 Ethics

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# *PHI220 Ethics*

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## **PHI220 ETHICS**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

Pressbooks/VIVA Open Publishing  
Church Hill, TN

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## **PART I**

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# **WHAT IS AN OPEN TEXTBOOK?**



## CHAPTER 1

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# *What is an Open Textbook?*

### **What is an Open Textbook?**

THIS MATERIAL IS BASED ON ORIGINAL WORK BY CHRISTINA HENDRICKS, AND PRODUCED WITH SUPPORT FROM THE REBUS COMMUNITY [HTTPS://PRESS.REBUS.COMMUNITY/INTRO-TO-PHIL-ETHICS](https://press.rebus.community/intro-to-phil-ethics)



An open textbook is like a commercial textbook, except: (1) it is publicly available online free of charge (and at low-cost in print), and (2) it has an open license that allows others to reuse it, download and revise it, and redistribute it. This book has a [Creative Commons Attribution](#) license, which allows reuse, revision, and redistribution so long as the original creator is attributed.

In addition to saving students money, an open textbook can be revised to be better contextualized to one's own teaching. In a recent study of undergraduate students in an introductory level physics course, students reported that the thing they most appreciated about the open textbook used in that course was that it was customized to fit the course, followed very closely by the fact that it was free of cost ([Hendricks, Reinsberg, and Rieger 2017](#)). For example, in an open textbook one may add in examples more relevant to one's own context or the topic of a course, or embedded slides, videos, or other resources. Note from the licensing information for this book that one must clarify in such cases that the book is an adaptation. A number of commercial publishers offer relatively inexpensive digital textbooks (whether on their own or available through an access code that students must pay to purchase), but these may have certain limitations and other issues:

- Access for students is often limited to a short period of time;

- Students cannot buy used copies from others, nor sell their own copies to others, to save money;

- Depending on the platform, there may be limits to how students can interact with and take notes on the books (and they may not be able to export their notes outside the book, so lose access to those as well when they lose access to the book).

None of these is the case with open textbooks. Students can download an open textbook and keep it for as long as they wish. They can interact with it in multiple formats: on the web; as editable word processing formats; offline as PDF, EPUB; as a physical print book, and more.

## **A note to course instructors from Deborah Holt:**

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**The topic “What is an open textbook” offers a unique opportunity to use the subject of open educational resources (OER) as an introductory discussion question. A suggested discussion question is: “What is an ethical problem one could face with the use of an open textbook and/or open educational resources (OER)?”**

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## **PART II**

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# **PHI220 ETHICS - COURSE GOAL, DESCRIPTION, LEARNING TOPICS & OUTCOMES**



## CHAPTER 2

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# *PHI220 Ethics - Course Goal, Description, Learning Topics & Outcomes*

## **PHI220 Ethics - Course Goal, Description, Learning Topics & Outcomes**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Course Title: Ethics | Course Number Phil 220                              |
| Credit Hours 3       | Recommended Course Prerequisites/Corequisites: None |

|   |
|---|
| Goal of Course: To understand and recognize the role of philosophical concepts and theories regarding morality and apply them to concrete moral dilemmas. |
| Intended Audience: Fulfills general education humanities requirement.   |

|   |
|---|
| Catalog Course Description: Provides a systematic study of representative ethical concepts and theories and discusses their application to concrete moral dilemmas. Lecture, 3 hours. |
|---|

COURSE STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES ( Course-Level Outcomes)

| General Learning Outcome Topics   | GLO Course Outcome   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Communication                     | 1. Through written, visual, and/or oral communication identify and articulate concrete moral dilemmas and philosophical problems regarding morality.2. Through written, visual, and/or oral communication construct arguments to offer solutions to ethical problems, defend those solutions, and identify and respond to objections to those solutions. |
| Cultural and Social Understanding | 3. Demonstrate an understanding of the major historical theories of ethics that impact culture and society.4. Apply ethical theories to concrete moral dilemmas that impact culture and society.   |
| Critical Thinking                 | 5. Analyze and assess the strengths and weaknesses of ethical theories and of competing solutions to concrete moral dilemmas.  |

## COURSE MAJOR TOPICS OUTCOMES (Module-Level Outcomes)

| Course Major Topics                                     | Content Learning Outcomes (Module-Level Outcomes)   |
|---|---|
| The Discipline of Ethics(supports GLO Course Outcome 1) | Explain the discipline of philosophy and the place of ethics within that discipline.Distinguish the concept of moral value from other types of value.Explain the role of moral values in everyday life and identify concrete moral dilemmas.Distinguish among branches of ethics, such as metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. |
| Moral Reasoning(supports GLO Course Outcomes 2 & 4)     | Explain the role of logic in ethics.Distinguish between deductive and inductive arguments.Evaluate the quality of deductive and inductive arguments and identify fallacious reasoning.Distinguish between moral and nonmoral claims and discuss the role that each plays in moral reasoning.  |
| Relativism(supports GLO Course Outcomes 3 and 5)        | Explain the philosophical problem of relativism in ethics.Examine and compare major historical theories of metaethics, such as objectivism, subjectivism, and cultural relativism.Analyze and assess arguments for and against competing metaethical theories and theories' strengths and weaknesses.                                       |
| Normative Ethics(supports GLO Course Outcome 3 and 5)   | Explain the need for theories of moral value.Examine and compare major historical normative theories, such as virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, and utilitarianism.Analyze and assess arguments for and against competing normative theories and theories' strengths and weaknesses.   |
| Applied Ethics(supports GLO Course Outcomes 1 and 2)    | Identify and evaluate concrete moral dilemmas.Apply moral concepts and theories to concrete moral dilemmas.Argue for and defend solutions to concrete moral dilemmas.   |



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## **PART III**

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# **THE DISCIPLINE OF ETHICS**



## CHAPTER 3

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# *The Discipline of Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes*

### **The Discipline of Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

By the end of this learning unit, student will be able to:

- Explain the discipline of philosophy and the place of ethics within that discipline.
- Distinguish the concept of moral value from other types of value.
- Explain the role of moral values in everyday life and identify concrete moral dilemmas.
- Distinguish among branches of ethics, such as metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics

## CHAPTER 4

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# *Philosophy, Ethics and Thinking*

### **Philosophy, Ethics and Thinking**

MARK DIMMOCK AND ANDREW FISHER, ETHICS FOR A-LEVEL.  
CAMBRIDGE, UK: OPEN BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2017,  
[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.11647/OBP.0125](https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0125)



Philosophy is hard. Part of the reason it can feel so annoying is



because it seems like it should not be hard. After all, philosophy just involves thinking, and we all think — thinking is easy! We do it without...well, thinking. Yet philosophy involves not just thinking, but thinking well. Of course it is true that we all think. But thinking, like football, math, baking and singing is something we can get better at. Unfortunately, people rarely ask how. If you do not believe us, then just open your eyes. Society might be a whole lot better off if we thought well, more often. Philosophy will not give you the ability to solve the problems of the world; we are not that naive! But if you engage with philosophy, then you will be developing yourself as a thinker who thinks well. Philosophy is useful not merely to would-be philosophers, but also to any would be thinkers, perhaps heading off to make decisions in law, medicine, structural engineering — just about anything that requires you to think effectively and clearly. However, if Philosophy is hard, then Ethics is really hard. This might seem unlikely at first glance. After all, Ethics deals with issues of right and wrong, and we have been discussing “what is right” and “what is wrong” since we were children. Philosophy of Mind, on the other hand, deals with topics like the nature of consciousness, while Metaphysics deals with the nature of existence itself. Indeed, compared to understanding a lecture in the Philosophy of Physics, arguing about the ethics of killing in video games might seem something of a walk in the park. This is misleading, not because other areas of philosophy are easy, but because the complexity of ethics is well camouflaged.

When you study Ethics, and you evaluate what is right and wrong, it can be tempting and comforting to spend time simply defending your initial views; few people would come to a debate about vegetarianism, or abortion, without some pre-existing belief. If you are open-minded in your ethical approach then you need not reject everything you currently believe, but you should see these beliefs as starting points, or base camps, from which your inquiry commences. For example, why do you think that eating animals is

OK, or that abortion is wrong? If you think that giving to charity is good, what does “good” mean? For true success, ethics requires intellectual respect. If you might think that a particular position is obviously false, perhaps take this reaction as a red flag, as it may suggest that you have missed some important step of an argument — ask yourself why someone, presumably just as intellectually proficient as yourself, might have once accepted that position. If you are thinking well as an ethicist, then you are likely to have good reasons for your views, and be prepared to rethink those views where you cannot find such good reasons. In virtue of this, you are providing justification for the beliefs you have. It is the philosopher’s job, whatever beliefs you have, to ask why you hold those beliefs. What reasons might you have for those beliefs? For example, imagine the reason that you believe it is OK to eat meat is that it tastes nice. As philosophers we can say that this is not a particularly good reason. Presumably it might taste nice to eat your pet cat, or your neighbor, or your dead aunt; but in these cases the “taste justification” seems totally unimportant! The details of this debate are not relevant here. The point is that there are good and bad reasons for our beliefs and it is the philosopher’s job to reveal and analyze them (Hospers, 1997). Philosophy is more than just fact-learning, or a “history of ideas”. It is different from chemistry, mathematics, languages, theology etc. It is unique. Sure, it is important to learn some facts, and learn what others believed, but a successful student needs to do more than simply regurgitate information in order to both maneuver past the exam hurdles and to become a better ethicist.

Philosophy, and in particular Ethics, is a live and evolving subject. When you study philosophy you are entering a dialogue with those that have gone before you. Learning about what various philosophers think will enable you to become clearer about what you think and add to that evolving dialogue. In order to understand philosophy you need to be authentic with yourself and to ask what you think, using this as a guide to critically analyze the ideas

learned and lead yourself to your own justifiable conclusion. Philosophy is a living and dynamic subject that we cannot reduce to a few key facts, or a simplistic noting of what other people have said. Some people distinguish between “ethics” and “morality,” but we will use these words interchangeably. Moral questions are distinct from legal questions, although, of course, moral issues might have some implications for the law. That child labor is morally unacceptable might mean that we have a law against it. But it is unhelpful to answer whether something is morally right or wrong by looking to the laws of the land. It is quite easy to see why. Imagine a country which has a set of actions which are legally acceptable, but morally unacceptable or vice versa — the well-used example of Nazi Germany brings to mind this distinction. Therefore, in discussions about ethics do be wary of talking about legal issues. Much more often than not, such points will be irrelevant. Something to keep separate are moral reasons and prudential reasons. Prudential reasons relate to our personal reasons for doing things. Consider some examples. When defending slavery, people used to cite the fact that it supported the economy as a reason to keep it. It is true, of course, that this is a reason; it is a prudential reason, particularly for those who benefited from slavery such as traders or plantation owners. Yet, such a reason does not help us with the moral question of slavery. We would say “OK, but so what if it helps the economy! Is it right or wrong?”

Another important distinction is between descriptive and prescriptive claims. This is sometimes referred to as the “is/ought” gap. Consider some examples. Imagine the headline: “Scientists discover a gene explaining why we want to punch people wearing red trousers”. The article includes lots of science showing the genes and the statistical proof. Yet, none of this will tell us whether acting violently towards people wearing red trousers is morally acceptable. The explanation of why people feel and act in certain ways leaves it open as to how people morally ought to act. Consider

a more serious example, relating to the ethics of eating meat. Supporters of meat-eating often point to our incisor teeth. This shows that it is natural for us to eat meat, a fact used as a reason for thinking that it is morally acceptable to do so. But this is a bad argument. Just because we have incisors does not tell us how we morally ought to behave. It might explain why we find it easy to eat meat, and it might even explain why we like eating meat. But this is not relevant to the moral question. Don't you believe us? Imagine that dentists discover that our teeth are "designed" to eat other humans alive. What does this tell us about whether it is right or wrong to eat humans alive? Nothing. You will also be aware of the philosophical device known as a "thought experiment". These are hypothetical, sometimes fanciful, examples that are designed to aid our thinking about an issue. For example, imagine that you could travel back in time. You are pointing a gun at your grandfather when he was a child. Would it be possible for you to pull the trigger? Or, imagine that there is a tram running down a track. You could stop it, thereby saving five people, by throwing a fat man under the tracks. Is this the morally right thing to do? The details here are unimportant. What is important, is that it is inadequate to respond: "yes, but that could never happen!" Thought experiments are devices to help us to think about certain issues. Whether they are possible in real life does not stop us doing that thinking. Indeed, it is not just philosophy that uses thought experiments. When Einstein asked what would happen if he looked at his watch near a black hole, this was a thought experiment. In fact, most other subjects use thought experiments. It is just that philosophy uses them more frequently, and they are often a bit more bizarre.

Finally, we want to draw your attention to a common bad argument as we want you to be aware of the mistake it leads to. Imagine that a group of friends are arguing about which country has won the most Olympic gold medals. Max says China, Alastair says the US, Dinh says the UK. There is general ignorance and disagreement; but does this mean that there is not an answer to

the question of “which country has won the most Olympic gold medals?” No! We cannot move from the fact that people disagree to the conclusion that there is no answer. Now consider a parallel argument that we hear far too often. Imagine that you and your friends are discussing whether euthanasia is morally acceptable. Some say yes, the others say no. Each of you cite how different cultures have different views on euthanasia. Does this fact — that there is disagreement — mean that there is no answer to the question of whether euthanasia is morally acceptable? Again, the answer is no. That answer did not follow in the Olympic case, and it does not follow in the moral one either. So just because different cultures have different moral views, this does not show, by itself, that there is no moral truth and no answer to the question.

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## CHAPTER 5

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# *Ethics: A Discipline Within Philosophy*

### **Ethics: A Discipline Within Philosophy**

THIS MATERIAL IS BASED ON ORIGINAL WORK BY GEORGE MATTHEWS, AND PRODUCED WITH SUPPORT FROM THE REBUS COMMUNITY [HTTPS://PRESS.REBUS.COMMUNITY/INTRO-TO-PHIL-ETHICS](https://press.rebus.community/intro-to-phil-ethics)

Is it ever acceptable to lie in order to protect someone from harm? Is selfless generosity really possible, or are we humans always in one way or another motivated by selfish concerns? Should loyalty to family, friends and one's immediate community take precedence over one's duty to obey the law? Such questions, which belong to the rich and complex domain of moral reflection, are no doubt familiar sorts of questions, even if there may seem to be no clear way of answering them with more than a shrug of the shoulders and the assertion that "it all depends...." Moral philosophy or ethics (I am here using these terms as broadly synonymous in spite of distinctions between these terms that are sometimes made) is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the critical examination of these kinds of questions, along with the implicit assumptions and theoretical commitments that lie behind them.

Ethics is a branch of philosophical value theory devoted to exploration of the broad rules which define, regulate and constrain our social lives, as well as with the more abstract consideration of moral evaluation itself. Thus it also considers such questions as whether there are general or even universal principles to which we may appeal in our attempt to negotiate particular ethical dilemmas we may face. What might such principles look like and why should we in fact follow them when they require us to set aside our impulses or interests? Are universal principles even desirable as a goal in ethical deliberation and human development? Clearly moral reflection and deliberation lie at the core of what it means to be human, members of a species dependent upon each other and yet often unreliable and opportunistic at the same time. Nevertheless moral thinking presents us with a deep puzzle. We are all intimately familiar with moral thinking, while at the same time it may seem completely unclear how to approach it in anything but a piecemeal fashion, reliant upon received ideas, customary approaches, and gut feelings. And this is certainly not for a lack of attempts to get things right about the nature, origin, and basis of judgments

about right and wrong. These go back to at least the beginning of recorded history as is evident in some of the earliest extant written artifacts, such as the [stele of Hammurabi from ancient Mesopotamia](#) and the [Buddhist King Ashoka's inscriptions on pillars and boulders from the Gangetic plain in ancient India](#).

This book explores some of the major theoretical approaches to moral philosophy under the conviction that we both can and should subject moral reflection to critical analysis in search of the truth (or maybe the truths) about ethics. As a way of setting the stage for the detailed accounts of various philosophical approaches to morality and moral thinking, it may be helpful at the outset to distinguish between three different ways in which we might approach moral thinking. We might first of all take an approach similar to that of scientists interested in understanding and explaining some given set of phenomena. We can call such an approach “descriptive ethics” since it is concerned with describing and explaining the workings of moral deliberation as it actually takes place in the minds of real people. Although this approach serves as the starting point for some contemporary approaches to ethics, by and large philosophers are less interested in describing and explaining moral thinking than they are in the second of the two approaches, which more directly engages the evaluative side of the questions with which we started. That is, philosophers, unlike scientists, are interested not only in clarifying and explaining the workings of ethical thinking but also in examining the cases that can be made for particular moral principles and approaches. This “normative” or “prescriptive” side of philosophical ethics will be central to many of the chapters of this text, since they examine various philosophical arguments as to why some particular approach to ethics should in fact be the one we accept as opposed to its theoretical rivals. We may wonder, however, about the justification for this kind of partisan approach to ethics in the first place. This brings us to the third way we might approach ethics,



by taking a step back from particular approaches to look at ethical thinking as such, as it relates to other aspects of our intellectual and emotional lives. That is, we might ask more abstract theoretical questions about the warrant for both rational ethical deliberation and prescriptive approaches to ethics. This “meta-ethical” approach is important not only since it addresses the place of ethics in our larger mental lives, but also as a way of addressing concerns that seem to get in the way of the normative approaches we will be exploring.



**PART**

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## CHAPTER 6

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# *Normative Ethics, Metaethics and Applied Ethics: Three Branches of Ethics*

### **Normative Ethics, Metaethics and Applied Ethics: Three Branches of Ethics**

MARK DIMMOCK AND ANDREW FISHER, ETHICS FOR A-LEVEL.  
CAMBRIDGE, UK: OPEN BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2017,  
[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.11647/OBP.0125](https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0125)

### **NORMATIVE ETHICS, METAETHICS AND APPLIED ETHICS. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?**

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**Normative Ethics** is focused on the creation of theories that provide general moral rules governing our behavior, such as Utilitarianism or Kantian Ethics. The normative ethicist, rather than being a football player, is more like a referee who sets up the rules governing how the game is played.

**Metaethics** is the study of how we engage in ethics. Thus, the metaethicist has a role more similar to a football commentator rather than to a referee or player. The metaethicist judges and

comments on how the ethical game is being played rather than advancing practical arguments, or kicking the football, themselves. For example, the metaethicist might comment on the meaning and appropriateness of ethical language, just as the football commentator might remark on the appropriateness of particular tactics or set-piece routines

**Applied Ethics** is the study of how we should act in specific areas of our lives; how we should deal with issues like meat-eating, euthanasia or stealing. To use the football analogy, the applied ethicist kicks the philosophical football around just as a footballer kicks the ball on the field. A good applied ethicist might score goals and be successful by offering specific arguments that convince us to change our moral views in a particular corner of our lives.

Consider an analogy put forward by Andrew Fisher (2011). Imagine that ethics is like football.

- The **normative ethicist** is like a referee interested in the rules governing play. What interests him is the general theories that govern our moral behavior; how do we work out what is right and what is wrong?
- The **metaethicist** is like a football commentator. What interests her is how the very practice of ethics works. For example, the metaethicist might discuss how people use moral language; or comment on the psychology of immoral people; or ask whether moral properties exist.
- The **Applied Ethicists** are like the players. They “get their hands [or feet] dirty”. They take the general rules of normative ethics and “play” under them. What interests them is how we should act in specific areas. For example, how should we deal with issues like meat-eating, euthanasia or stealing? (pp. 1–4)

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Normative Ethics, Metaethics and Applied Ethics: Three Branches of Ethics by Mark Dimmock and Andrew Fisher, *Ethics for A-Level*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0125> is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

## CHAPTER 7

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# *Distinguishing Between the Concept of Moral Values & Other Types of Value*

### **Distinguishing Between the Concept of Moral Values & Other Types of Value**

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Take a look at the photographs below and answer the questions that follow them:





1 What do you think might be a common theme in these three photographs?

2 In what way does the behavior of the antelope in the photograph differ from that of the humans in the other two photographs?

Human beings, unlike most animals, are not locked into instinctive behavior patterns. The human brain allows far more scope and flexibility of action and choice than instinct allows to any other species. This flexibility of decision, choice and action requires human beings to be effective learners.

### **Human choice**

In the photograph above, the male antelope are fighting to determine who will lead the herd. Though the younger 'challenger' will no doubt watch for the most promising moment to attack the established leader, his urge to attack, and the particular time of the year when he feels this urge, are determined by instinct. On the other hand, although the soldiers may be fighting and the boss may be exhibiting aggression and dominance, their behavior is not bound by instinct. Bosses may choose to treat their subordinates more pleasantly, and soldiers may choose to become conscientious objectors. The fact that human thought and action are not bound by instinct, but involve choice, decision, and purpose, has an extremely significant implication in addition to our need to learn. It creates the possibility that out of the range of actions we may

choose, we may judge some to be better, and some worse, than others. In other words, we attribute a greater value to some choices than we do to others. We judge the action itself to be more, or less good in a moral sense.

### **Different kinds of value**

If we take the soldiers as our example, we will see that we could attach different types of value to their actions. We could evaluate the competence of the soldiers, the quality of their fighting skill. In doing so, we would use criteria such as the ability to foresee the enemy's movements, and a knowledge of weapons (knowledge how and knowledge that). We would call these military values practice-oriented values, and they would fall into much the same class of values as the "professional values". But we could also judge the soldiers' actions in another way. We could ask whether the cause for which they are fighting is a just one (defensive), or an unjust one (aggressive). In other words, we could evaluate the soldiers' actions on moral grounds. The criteria would then be justice and a reverence for human life, and we would refer to these as moral values, even though they appeared in a military context. So while there are values and virtues specific to every field of human activity, *moral values are what enable us to judge whether an action is a 'good' or 'bad' action in itself – whatever the field of human activity.* Both of the above types of value come into the picture because human actions are not controlled by instinct, and we can judge them as 'better' or 'worse' in the two rather different senses we have just explained. Choice is part of the picture in both cases because the soldiers can choose both how and why they will fight. *So for now, we can define values (both practice-oriented and moral) as beliefs about the merit or relative importance of different experiences and actions.* They provide the criteria by which we judge human action, and the reasons for choosing to act in particular ways. *Moral values are not beliefs about, or standards of, competence in a particular field of human activity; rather they relate to actions*

or personal qualities that may be considered good or bad in a more general sense. In this section we focus mainly on moral values.

### **Values are not facts: descriptive versus prescriptive statements**

First, consider these two statements:

- a. 'The earth is round, like a ball.'
- b. 'People should be honest with one another.'

Statement **a** is *factual*: it describes the earth and is therefore what we would call *a descriptive statement*. on the other hand, statement **b** does not describe anything. it does not say anything, factual or otherwise, about the way things are. rather, it says something about the way things should be. We call this *a prescriptive statement, since it offers a 'prescription' of how things should be*.

We can say that description **a** is true because human beings have observed the earth to be spherical from outer space. You may also consider statement **b** to be true, but this would not be because it describes anything correctly. If someone acts dishonestly by cheating in an exam, that person disregards a moral principle, but the moral principle does not become false just because things turn out to be different from the way they ought to be.

*All this means is that values are true or false in a different way from the way factual statements may be said to be true or false.* Descriptive statements of fact, and prescriptive statements of value, serve different human purposes. We do not decide on the truth or falsity of prescriptive statements by observing the world carefully to check whether they correctly describe things as they are. rather, we decide whether they are true or not by the use of reason.

### **Moral values are different from preferences**

We now need to shift our attention to the second distinction that we set ourselves to examine – *the distinction between moral values on the one hand, and more general judgments of value such as preferences, personal taste, or appraisals of better or worse performance on the other.*

Consider the following value statements:

- a. 'There's nothing as good as a cup of coffee to get me started at the beginning of the day.'
- b. 'Mandisa is very good at getting learners to co-operate.'
- c. 'A good teacher will never lie to learners.'

All of these statements claim that something, or some action, is 'good'. The first statement **a**, however, is quite different from the moral statement **c**. it simply expresses an individual's preference for something that that person finds positive. it implies no duty and imposes no obligation on anyone: no-one is expected to feel the same way about coffee. Therefore, we could not reasonably expect the speaker to 'defend' his or her liking for coffee by supplying logically persuasive reasons for it. All we could require of the speaker is to be sincere for the statement to be acceptable.

The exact opposite applies to moral statements like **c**. This statement implies an obligation on all teachers never to lie to learners. Because of this implied obligation or 'duty', we are entitled to ask why it would be wrong to act in this way. in other words, we have a right to expect that moral statements or principles, which seek to get us to act in certain ways, be backed by logically convincing reasons. if the reasons given are sound, and acceptable to reasonable people, then we must acknowledge that the moral statement is true, and that it applies to us. on the other hand, if no good reasons can be given, we would be justified in rejecting the statement as subjective and having no hold over us.

Value statements that may be prescriptive but not specifically moral, often refer to competence or performance – statement **b** ('Mandisa is very good at getting learners to co-operate') is an example. We call these statements appraisals because they may include a degree of personal preference. They are often subjective, but this is not necessarily the case. Some appraisals based on practice-oriented values are sound, accurate, and objective evaluations. But, as with moral values, we will only be able to judge whether this is the case or not if good reasons are given.

So, appraisal statements lie somewhere between mere *preferences* (they can be subjective) and *moral value statements* (they need to be supported with reasons). The key point about the arguments surrounding subjectivism is that, *just because moral values and preferences both involve valuing, it does not mean that they are both subjective.*



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## CHAPTER 8

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# *The Role of Moral Values in Everyday Life: Moral Development*

### **The Role of Moral Values in Everyday Life: Moral Development**

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### **Moral Development & Forming a sense of rights and responsibilities**

**Morality** is a system of beliefs about what is right and good compared to what is wrong or bad. **Moral development** refers to changes in moral beliefs as a person grows older and gains maturity. Moral beliefs are related to, but not identical with, moral *behavior*: it is possible to know the right thing to do, but not actually do it. It is also not the same as knowledge of *social conventions*, which are arbitrary customs needed for the smooth operation of society. Social conventions may have a moral element, but they have a primarily practical purpose. Conventionally, for

example, motor vehicles all keep to the same side of the street (to the right in the United States, to the left in Great Britain). The convention allows for smooth, accident-free flow of traffic. But following the convention also has a moral element, because an individual who chooses to drive on the wrong side of the street can cause injuries or even death. In this sense, choosing the wrong side of the street is wrong morally, though the choice is also unconventional.

When it comes to schooling and teaching, moral choices are not restricted to occasional dramatic incidents, but are woven into almost every aspect of classroom life. Imagine this simple example. Suppose that you are teaching, reading to a small group of second-graders, and the students are taking turns reading a story out loud. Should you give every student the same amount of time to read, even though some might benefit from having additional time? Or should you give more time to the students who need extra help, even if doing so bores classmates and deprives others of equal shares of “floor time”? Which option is more fair, and which is more considerate? Simple dilemmas like this happen every day at all grade levels simply because students are diverse, and because class time and a teacher’s energy are finite.

Embedded in this rather ordinary example are moral themes about fairness or justice, on the one hand, and about consideration or care on the other. It is important to keep both themes in mind when thinking about how students develop beliefs about right or wrong. A **morality of justice** is about human rights—or more specifically, about respect for fairness, impartiality, equality, and individuals’ independence. A **morality of care**, on the other hand, is about human responsibilities—more specifically, about caring for others, showing consideration for individuals’ needs, and interdependence among individuals.

### **Kohlberg’s morality of justice**

One of the best-known explanations of how morality of justice develops was developed by Lawrence Kohlberg and his associates

(Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1991). Using a stage model similar to Piaget’s, Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development, grouped into three levels. Individuals experience the stages universally and in sequence as they form beliefs about justice. He named the levels simply preconventional, conventional, and (you guessed it) postconventional. The levels and stages are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Moral stages according to Kohlberg**

| Moral stage                       | Definition of what is “good”                                   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Preconventional Level</i>      |  |
| Stage 1: Obedience and punishment | Action that is rewarded and <i>not</i> punished                |
| Stage 2: Market exchange          | Action that is agreeable to the child and child’s partner      |
| <i>Conventional Level</i>         |  |
| Stage 3: Peer opinion             | Action that wins approval from friends or peers                |
| Stage 4: Law and order            | Action that conforms to the community customs or laws          |
| <i>Postconventional Level</i>     |  |
| Stage 5: Social contract          | Action that follows socially accepted ways of making decisions |
| Stage 6: Universal principles     | Action that is consistent with self-chosen, general principles |

**Preconventional justice: obedience and mutual advantage**

The *preconventional* level of moral development coincides approximately with the preschool period of life and with Piaget’s preoperational period of thinking. At this age the child is still relatively self-centered and insensitive to the moral effects of actions on others. The result is a somewhat short-sighted orientation to



morality. Initially (Kohlberg's Stage 1), the child adopts an **ethics of obedience and punishment**—a sort of “morality of keeping out of trouble.” The rightness and wrongness of actions is determined by whether actions are rewarded or punished by authorities such as parents or teachers. If helping yourself to a cookie brings affectionate smiles from adults, then taking the cookie is considered morally “good.” If it brings scolding instead, then it is morally “bad.” The child does not think about why an action might be praised or scolded; in fact, says Kohlberg, he would be incapable at Stage 1 of considering the reasons even if adults offered them.

Eventually the child learns not only to respond to positive consequences, but also learns how to *produce* them by exchanging favors with others. The new ability creates Stage 2, an **ethics of market exchange**. At this stage the morally “good” action is one that favors not only the child, but another person directly involved. A “bad” action is one that lacks this reciprocity. If trading the sandwich from your lunch for the cookies in your friend's lunch is mutually agreeable, then the trade is morally good; otherwise it is not. This perspective introduces a type of fairness into the child's thinking for the first time. But it still ignores the larger context of actions—the effects on people not present or directly involved. In Stage 2, for example, it would also be considered morally “good” to pay a classmate to do another student's homework, provided that both parties regard the arrangement as being fair.

**Conventional justice: conformity to peers and society**

As children move into the school years, their lives expand to include a larger number and range of peers and (eventually) of the

community as a whole. The change leads to *conventional morality*, which are beliefs based on what this larger array of people agree on—hence Kohlberg’s use of the term “conventional.” At first, in Stage 3, the child’s reference group are immediate peers, so Stage 3 is sometimes called the **ethics of peer opinion**. If peers believe, for example, that it is morally good to behave politely with as many people as possible, then the child is likely to agree with the group and to regard politeness as not merely an arbitrary social convention, but a moral “good.” This approach to moral belief is a bit more stable than the approach in Stage 2, because the child is taking into account the reactions not just of one other person, but of many. But it can still lead astray if the group settles on beliefs that adults consider morally wrong, like “Shop lifting for candy bars is fun and desirable.”

Eventually, as the child becomes a youth and the social world expands even more, he or she acquires even larger numbers of peers and friends. He or she is therefore more likely to encounter disagreements about ethical issues and beliefs. Resolving the complexities lead to Stage 4, the **ethics of law and order**, in which the young person increasingly frames moral beliefs in terms of what the majority of society believes. Now, an action is morally good if it is legal or at least customarily approved by most people, including people whom the youth does not know personally. This attitude leads to an even more stable set of principles than in the previous stage, though it is still not immune from ethical mistakes. A community or society may agree, for example, that people of a certain race should be treated with deliberate disrespect, or that a factory owner is entitled to dump waste water into a commonly shared lake or river. To develop ethical principles that reliably avoid mistakes like these require further stages of moral development.

### **Postconventional justice: social contract and universal principles**

As a person becomes able to think abstractly (or “formally,” in Piaget’s sense), ethical beliefs shift from acceptance of what the

community *does* believe to the *process* by which community beliefs are formed. The new focus constitutes Stage 5, the **ethics of social contract**. Now an action, belief, or practice is morally good if it has been created through fair, democratic processes that respect the rights of the people affected. Consider, for example, the laws in some areas that require motorcyclists to wear helmets. In what sense are the laws about this behavior ethical? Was it created by consulting with and gaining the consent of the relevant people? Were cyclists consulted and did they give consent? Or how about doctors or the cyclists' families? Reasonable, thoughtful individuals disagree about how thoroughly and fairly these *consultation* processes should be. In focusing on the processes by which the law was created, however, individuals are thinking according to Stage 5, the ethics of social contract, regardless of the position they take about wearing helmets. In this sense, beliefs on both sides of a debate about an issue can sometimes be morally sound even if they contradict each other.

Paying attention to due process certainly seems like it should help to avoid mindless conformity to conventional moral beliefs. As an ethical strategy, though, it too can sometimes fail. The problem is that an ethics of social contract places more faith in democratic process than the process sometimes deserves, and does not pay enough attention to the content of what gets decided. In principle (and occasionally in practice), a society could decide democratically to kill off every member of a racial minority, for example, but would deciding this by due process make it ethical? The realization that ethical means can sometimes serve unethical ends leads some individuals toward Stage 6, the **ethics of self-chosen, universal principles**. At this final stage, the morally good action is based on personally held principles that apply both to the person's immediate life as well as to the larger community and society. The universal principles may include a belief in democratic due process (Stage 5 ethics), but also other principles, such as a belief in the dignity of all human life or the sacredness of the natural

environment. At Stage 6, the universal principles will guide a person's beliefs even if the principles mean disagreeing occasionally with what is customary (Stage 4) or even with what is legal (Stage 5).

### **Gilligan's morality of care**

As logical as they sound, Kohlberg's stages of moral justice are not sufficient for understanding the development of moral beliefs. To see why, suppose that you have a student who asks for an extension of the deadline for an assignment. The justice orientation of Kohlberg's theory would prompt you to consider issues of whether granting the request is fair. Would the late student be able to put more effort into the assignment than other students? Would the extension place a difficult demand on you, since you would have less time to mark the assignments? These are important considerations related to the rights of students and the teacher. In addition to these, however, are considerations having to do with the responsibilities that you and the requesting student have for each other and for others. Does the student have a valid personal reason (illness, death in the family, etc.) for the assignment being late? Will the assignment lose its educational value if the student has to turn it in prematurely? These latter questions have less to do with fairness and rights, and more to do with taking care of and responsibility for students. They require a framework different from Kohlberg's to be understood fully.

One such framework has been developed by Carol Gilligan, whose ideas center on a **morality of care**, or system of beliefs about human responsibilities, care, and consideration for others. Gilligan proposed three moral positions that represent different extents or breadth of ethical care. Unlike Kohlberg, Piaget, or Erikson, she does not claim that the positions form a strictly developmental sequence, but only that they can be ranked hierarchically according to their depth or subtlety. In this respect her theory is "semi-developmental" in a way similar to Maslow's theory of motivation (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor, Gilligan, &

Sullivan, 1995). Table 2 summarizes the three moral positions from Gilligan's theory

Table 2: Positions of moral development according to Gilligan

| Moral position                   | Definition of what is morally good   |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Position 1: Survival orientation | Action that considers one's personal needs only                                  |
| Position 2: Conventional care    | Action that considers others' needs or preferences, but not one's own            |
| Position 3: Integrated care      | Action that attempts to coordinate one's own personal needs with those of others |

Position 1: caring as survival

The most basic kind of caring is a **survival orientation**, in which a person is concerned primarily with his or her own welfare. If a teenage girl with this ethical position is wondering whether to get an abortion, for example, she will be concerned entirely with the effects of the abortion on herself. The morally good choice will be whatever creates the least stress for herself and that disrupts her own life the least. Responsibilities to others (the baby, the father, or her family) play little or no part in her thinking.

As a moral position, a survival orientation is obviously not satisfactory for classrooms on a widespread scale. If every student only looked out for himself or herself, classroom life might become rather unpleasant! Nonetheless, there are situations in which focusing primarily on yourself is both a sign of good mental health and relevant to teachers. For a child who has been bullied at school or sexually abused at home, for example, it is both healthy and morally desirable to speak out about how bullying or abuse has affected the victim. Doing so means essentially looking out for

the victim's own needs at the expense of others' needs, including the bully's or abuser's. Speaking out, in this case, requires a survival orientation and is healthy because the child is taking caring of herself.

### **Position 2: conventional caring**

A more subtle moral position is **caring for others**, in which a person is concerned about others' happiness and welfare, and about reconciling or integrating others' needs where they conflict with each other. In considering an abortion, for example, the teenager at this position would think primarily about what other people prefer. Do the father, her parents, and/or her doctor want her to keep the child? The morally good choice becomes whatever will please others the best. This position is more demanding than Position 1, ethically and intellectually, because it requires coordinating several persons' needs and values. But it is often morally insufficient because it ignores one crucial person: the self.

### **Position 3: integrated caring**

The most developed form of moral caring in Gilligan's model is **integrated caring**, the coordination of personal needs and values with those of others. Now the morally good choice takes account of everyone *including* yourself, not everyone *except* yourself. In considering an abortion, a woman at Position 3 would think not only about the consequences for the father, the unborn child, and her family, but also about the consequences for herself. How would bearing a child affect her own needs, values, and plans? This perspective leads to moral beliefs that are more comprehensive, but ironically are also more prone to dilemmas because the widest possible range of individuals are being considered.

### **Character development: Integrating ethical understanding, care, and action**

The theories described so far all offer frameworks for understanding how children grow into youth and adults. Those by Maslow, Kohlberg, and Gilligan are more specific than the one by

Erikson in that they focus on the development of understanding about ethics. From a teacher's point of view, though, the theories are all limited in two ways. One problem is that they focus primarily on cognition—on what children *think* about ethical issues—more than on emotions and actions. The other is that they say little about how to encourage ethical development.

### **Looking at how to encourage ethical development from an educator's perspective**

Encouragement is part of teachers' jobs, and doing it well requires understanding not only what students know about ethics, but also how they feel about it and what ethical actions they are actually prepared to take.

Many educators have recognized these educational needs, and a number of them have therefore developed practical programs that integrate ethical understanding, care, and action. As a group the programs are often called **character education**, though individual programs have a variety of specific names (for example, *moral dilemma education*, *integrative ethical education*, *social competence education*, and many more). Details of the programs vary, but they all combine a focus on ethical knowledge with attention to ethical feelings and actions (Elkind & Sweet, 2004; Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Narvaez, 2010). Character education programs goes well beyond just teaching students to obey ethical rules, such as "Always tell the whole truth" or "Always do what the teacher tells you to do." Such rules require very little thinking on the part of the student, and there are usually occasions in which a rule that is supposedly universal needs to be modified, "bent," or even disobeyed. (For example, if telling the whole truth might hurt someone's feelings, it might sometimes be more considerate—and thus more ethical—to soften the truth a bit, or even to say nothing at all.)

Instead, character education is about inviting students to think about the broad questions of his or her life, such as "What kind of person should I be?" or "How should I live my life?" Thoughtful answers to such broad questions help to answer a host of more

specific questions that have ethical implications, such as “Should I listen to the teacher right now, even if she is a bit boring, or just tune out?” or “Should I offer to help my friend with the homework she is struggling with, or hold back so that learns to do it herself?” Most of the time, there is not enough time to reason about questions like these deliberately or consciously. Responses have to become intuitive, automatic, and *embodied*—meaning that they have to be based in fairly immediate emotional responses (Narvaez, 2009). The goal of character education is to develop students’ capacities to respond to daily ethical choices not only consciously and cognitively, but also intuitively and emotionally. To the extent that this goal is met, students can indeed live a good, ethically responsible life.

### **Schoolwide programs of character education**

In the most comprehensive approaches to character education, an entire school commits itself to developing students’ ethical character, despite the immense diversity among students (Minow, Schweder, & Markus, 2008). All members of the staff—not just teachers and administrators, but also custodians, and educational assistants—focus on developing positive relationships with students. The underlying theme that develops is one of cooperation and mutual care, not competition. Fairness, respect and honesty pervade class and school activities; discipline, for example, focuses on solving conflicts between students and between students and teachers, rather than on rewarding obedience or punishing wrong-doers. The approach requires significant reliance on democratic meetings and discussions, both in classrooms and wherever else groups work together in school.

### **Classroom programs of character education**

Even if a teacher is teaching character education simply within her own classroom, there are many strategies available. The goal in this case is to establish the classroom as a place where everyone feels included, and where everyone treats everyone else with civility and respect. Conflicts and disagreements may still occur, but



in a caring community they can be resolved without undue anger or hostility.

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# *Ethical Behavior & Moral Values in Everyday Life*

## **Ethical Behavior & Moral Values in Everyday Life**

ETHICS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT BY STEVE MCCARTNEY AND  
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### **The Importance of Ethical Behavior**

For citizens, morality and integrity are important characteristics to demonstrate. We instinctively know that it is good to be moral and act with integrity, but by coming to an understanding of the reasons for morality and integrity, we will be motivated to champion such behavior. Among the reasons to be moral and integral are to:

- **Make society better.** When we help make society better, we are rewarded with also making better own lives and the lives of our families and friends. Without moral conduct, society would be a miserable place.
- **Treat everyone equally.** Equality is a cornerstone of most Western democracies, where all individuals are afforded the same rights. This is not possible without the

majority of citizens behaving in a moral manner.

- **Secure meaningful employment.** Often employers will look at a person's past behavior as a predictor of future behavior. Someone who has a history of immoral behavior will have difficulty securing employment in a meaningful job, as that person may not be trusted.
- **Succeed at business.** If you are employed in an occupation in which there you must rely on others, your moral conduct will determine the degree of goodwill that you receive from others. Businesses that have a checkered moral history are typically viewed with caution and are unlikely to attract new customers through word of mouth, and therefore are unlikely to prosper. This is especially the case where social media makes customer reviews readily accessible.
- **Lessen stress.** When we make immoral decisions, we tend to feel uncomfortable and concerned about our decision making. Making the right moral decision, or taking a principled perspective on an issue, reduces stress.

Ultimately, ethics is important not so that "we can understand" philosophically, but rather so we can "improve how we live" (Lafollette, 2007). By being moral, we enrich our lives and the lives of those around us. It's especially important to live a moral life when we are young, as it is helpful to exercise and practice these concepts before being confronted with more complex issues. Lafollette (2007) theorizes that ethics is like most everything else that we strive to be good at; it requires practice and effort. Practicing and making an effort to make moral decisions throughout life will pay dividends when we are faced with serious moral dilemmas. Furthermore, having insight into "...historical, political, economic, sociological, and psychological insights..."

(Lafollette, 2007, p.7) allows us, as decision makers, to make more informed decisions, which will likely result in moral decisions. In sum, the practice of being moral, allows us to work on these skills, so when we are faced with real situations that impact others, we are ready

Lafollette (2007) also emphasizes the need to understand and develop our virtues. Knowing that we ought to behave in a certain way, yet missing an opportunity to exercise moral behavior, is an indication of the need to “sharpen moral vision.” For example, we know that we ought to stay in good physical shape but often do not. This illustrates the need to be mindful of a virtue (in this case perseverance) that is important and must be developed.

Successful business leaders often say that treating people morally is a very important aspect in obtaining success. A person's reputation is of key importance for a business leader, and if a person's reputation is damaged by poor ethical conduct, the business will also suffer. The same is true in all walks of life. Where ethics are taken seriously, and people strive to make ethical decisions and actions, personal and professional success follows.

Critics may argue that this attitude is self-serving and that some individuals act ethically only for their own self-interest to be successful or happy. Critics would add that this is not the right reason to be ethical, and therefore is not being truly ethical. A counter argument may be that the action itself can be regarded as ethical, regardless of the reason for taking the action. This perspective focuses more on the end result rather than the means to the end.

### **Moral Values in Everyday Life**

[Ethics & Compliance Initiative's Resource Center](#) (2020) identifies the following values as typical values that appear throughout codes of ethics. These are important for us to remember when faced with difficult ethical problems and decisions where we are required to be aware of all the values of each of the vested stakeholders. Consider how the following list of moral values can be used to

develop a “moral compass” to help direct actions and decision of everyday life:

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Acceptance</b>      | Favorable reception or belief in something  |
| <b>Accomplishment</b>  | Doing or finishing something successfully   |
| <b>Accountability</b>  | Obligation or willingness to accept responsibility  |
| <b>Adaptability</b>    | The ability to modify behavior to fit changing situations                                       |
| <b>Adventurousness</b> | Inclination to undertake new and daring enterprises   |
| <b>Allegiance</b>      | Loyalty or the obligation of loyalty  |
| <b>Altruism</b>        | Unselfish concern for the welfare of others   |
| <b>Ambition</b>        | An eager or strong desire to achieve something  |
| <b>Appreciation</b>    | Recognizing the quality, value or significance of people and things                             |
| <b>Aspiration</b>      | A strong or persistent desire for high achievement  |
| <b>Assiduousness</b>   | Unceasing; persistent; diligent   |
| <b>Authenticity</b>    | The quality or condition of being trustworthy or genuine  |
| <b>Autonomy</b>        | The condition or quality of being independent   |
| <b>Benevolence</b>     | An inclination to perform kind, charitable acts   |
| <b>Camaraderie</b>     | Goodwill and lighthearted rapport between or among friends                                      |
| <b>Caring</b>          | Feeling and exhibiting concern and empathy for others   |
| <b>Changeability</b>   | The ability to modify or adapt to differing circumstances                                       |
| <b>Charity</b>         | Generosity toward others or toward humanity   |
| <b>Chastity</b>        | The condition of being of virtuous character  |
| <b>Cheerfulness</b>    | The quality of being cheerful and dispelling gloom  |
| <b>Citizenship</b>     | Exercising the duties, rights, and privileges of being a citizen                                |
| <b>Clear thinking</b>  | Acting intelligently without mental confusion   |
| <b>Collaboration</b>   | To work cooperatively especially in a joint intellectual effort                                 |
| <b>Commitment</b>      | Being bound emotionally or intellectually to a course of action or to another person or persons |
| <b>Community</b>       | Sharing, participation, and fellowship with others  |
| <b>Compassion</b>      | Deep awareness of the suffering of others coupled with the wish to relieve it                   |
| <b>Competence</b>      | The state or quality of being adequately or well qualified                                      |
| <b>Competitive</b>     | To strive to do something better than someone else  |
| <b>Composure</b>       | Maintaining a tranquil or calm state of mind  |

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Concern</b>           | Regard for or interest in someone or something   |
| <b>Conscientiousness</b> | The trait of being painstaking and careful   |
| <b>Consideration</b>     | Process of employing continuous, careful thought and examination   |
| <b>Consistency</b>       | Reliability or uniformity of successive results or events  |
| <b>Constancy</b>         | Steadfastness in purpose   |
| <b>Cooperation</b>       | The willing association and interaction of a group of people to accomplish a goal  |
| <b>Courage</b>           | The state or quality of mind or spirit that enables one to face danger, fear, or vicissitudes with confidence and resolution |
| <b>Courtesy</b>          | Civility; consideration for others   |
| <b>Credibility</b>       | The quality or power to elicit belief  |
| <b>Decency</b>           | Conformity to prevailing standards of propriety or modesty   |
| <b>Dedication</b>        | Selfless devotion of energy or time  |
| <b>Democracy</b>         | The principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community  |
| <b>Dependability</b>     | The trait of being reliable  |
| <b>Determination</b>     | Firmness of will, strength, purpose of character   |
| <b>Diversity</b>         | A point of respect in which things differ; variety   |
| <b>Easygoing</b>         | Relaxed or informal in attitude or standards   |
| <b>Education</b>         | Obtaining or developing knowledge or skill through a learning process  |
| <b>Efficiency</b>        | The quality of producing an effect or result with a reasonable degree of effort to energy expended                           |
| <b>Empathy</b>           | Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.   |
| <b>Encouragement</b>     | The act of incitement to action or to practice   |
| <b>Equality</b>          | The right of different groups of people to receive the same treatment  |
| <b>Equity</b>            | The state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair  |
| <b>Ethics</b>            | The way people behave based on how their beliefs about what is right and wrong influence behavior                            |
| <b>Excellence</b>        | State of possessing good qualities in an eminent degree  |
| <b>Fairness</b>          | Consistent with rules, logic, or ethics  |
| <b>Faith</b>             | Confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing   |

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Faithfulness</b>    | Adhering firmly and devotedly to someone or something that elicits or demands one's fidelity                  |
| <b>Fidelity</b>        | Faithfulness; loyalty or devotion   |
| <b>Flexibility</b>     | Responsive to change  |
| <b>Forgiveness</b>     | The willingness to stop blaming or being angry with someone   |
| <b>Fortitude</b>       | The strength or firmness of mind that enables a person to face danger, pain or despondency with stoic resolve |
| <b>Friendship</b>      | A relationship between people based on mutual esteem and goodwill   |
| <b>Generosity</b>      | Liberality in giving or willingness to give   |
| <b>Gentleness</b>      | The quality of being mild and docile  |
| <b>Genuine</b>         | Not spurious or counterfeit   |
| <b>Giving</b>          | Voluntarily transferring knowledge or property without receiving value in return                              |
| <b>Goodness</b>        | Morally right, or admirable because of kind, thoughtful, or honest behavior                                   |
| <b>Goodwill</b>        | A friendly attitude in which you wish that good things happen to people                                       |
| <b>Gratitude</b>       | A feeling of thankfulness and appreciation  |
| <b>Hardworking</b>     | Industrious and tireless  |
| <b>Helpfulness</b>     | The property of providing useful assistance or friendliness evidenced by a kindly and helpful disposition     |
| <b>Honesty</b>         | Fairness and straightforwardness of conduct   |
| <b>Honor</b>           | Principled uprightness of character; personal integrity   |
| <b>Hope</b>            | The feeling that something desired can be had or will happen  |
| <b>Humility</b>        | Feeling that you have no special importance that makes you better than others                                 |
| <b>Industriousness</b> | The characteristic of regularly working hard  |
| <b>Ingenuity</b>       | Inventive skill or imagination  |
| <b>Initiative</b>      | Ability to begin or to follow through energetically with a plan or task                                       |
| <b>Integrity</b>       | Strict adherence to moral values and principles   |
| <b>Joy</b>             | Intense or exultant happiness   |
| <b>Justice</b>         | Conformity to moral rightness in action or attitude   |
| <b>Kindness</b>        | The quality or state of being beneficent  |



|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Law-abiding</b>     | Abiding by the encoded rules of society   |
| <b>Liberty</b>         | The right and power to act, believe, or express oneself in a manner of one's own choosing.                              |
| <b>Love</b>            | A feeling of intense desire and attraction toward a person or idea  |
| <b>Loyalty</b>         | A feeling or attitude of devotion, attachment and affection.  |
| <b>Mercy</b>           | Forgiveness shown toward someone whom you have the power to punish  |
| <b>Moderation</b>      | Having neither too little or too much of anything   |
| <b>Morals</b>          | Individual beliefs about what is right and wrong  |
| <b>Obedience</b>       | Compliance with that which is required; subjection to rightful restraint or control                                     |
| <b>Opportunity</b>     | Favorable or advantageous circumstance or combination of circumstances  |
| <b>Optimism</b>        | A bright, hopeful view and expectation of the best possible outcome   |
| <b>Patience</b>        | The ability to accept delay, suffering, or annoyance without complaint or anger   |
| <b>Peace</b>           | Freedom from war or violence  |
| <b>Perseverance</b>    | Steady persistence in adhering to a course of action, a belief, or a purpose  |
| <b>Promise-keeping</b> | Keeping your word that that you will certainly do something   |
| <b>Prudence</b>        | Doing something right because it is the right thing to do   |
| <b>Punctuality</b>     | Adherence to the exact time of a commitment or event  |
| <b>Purity</b>          | Moral goodness  |
| <b>Reason</b>          | The ability to think and make good judgments  |
| <b>Recognition</b>     | An acceptance as true or valid  |
| <b>Reconciliation</b>  | Enabling two people or groups [to] adjust the way they think about divergent ideas or positions so they can accept both |
| <b>Reliability</b>     | Consistent performance upon which you can depend or trust   |
| <b>Repentance</b>      | Remorse or contrition for past conduct  |
| <b>Resilience</b>      | The ability to rebound quickly from misfortune or change  |
| <b>Resourcefulness</b> | The ability to act effectively or imaginatively, especially in difficult situations                                     |
| <b>Respect</b>         | Polite attitude shown toward someone or something that you consider important   |
| <b>Responsibility</b>  | That for which someone is responsible or answerable   |

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Righteousness</b>   | The state of being morally upright; without guilt or sin  |
| <b>Sacrifice</b>       | To give up something for something else considered more important                                   |
| <b>Self-control</b>    | Control of personal emotions, desires, or actions by one's own will                                 |
| <b>Self-discipline</b> | Making yourself do things when you should, even if you do not want to do them                       |
| <b>Sensitivity</b>     | Awareness of the needs and emotions of others   |
| <b>Serenity</b>        | Calmness of mind and evenness of temper   |
| <b>Sharing</b>         | To allow others to participate in, use, enjoy, or experience jointly or in turns                    |
| <b>Sincerity</b>       | Genuineness, honesty, and freedom from duplicity  |
| <b>Sobriety</b>        | Habitual freedom from inordinate passion or overheated imagination; calmness; coolness; seriousness |
| <b>Stamina</b>         | The physical or mental strength to do something for a long time                                     |
| <b>Stewardship</b>     | The careful conducting, supervising, or managing of something                                       |
| <b>Supportive</b>      | Furnishing support or assistance  |
| <b>Thoughtfulness</b>  | The tendency to anticipate needs or wishes  |
| <b>Tolerance</b>       | Recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of others                                       |
| <b>Tranquility</b>     | A state of calm and peacefulness  |
| <b>Trustworthiness</b> | The trait of deserving confidence   |
| <b>Understanding</b>   | Knowing how something works or a positive, truthful relationship between people                     |
| <b>Values</b>          | Core beliefs that guide and motivate attitudes and actions  |
| <b>Virtue</b>          | Doing something right because it is the good thing to do  |
| <b>Wisdom</b>          | The ability to make good judgments based on what you have learned from your experience              |
| <b>Work</b>            | Perform as intended or desired  |

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# *What is a Moral (Ethical) Dilemma?*

## **What is a Moral (Ethical) Dilemma?**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

By now, you should have a good understanding of how we define “ethics” and “morals.” We will now turn our attention to defining moral (ethical) dilemma. When defining moral (ethical) dilemma, it is important to recognize that a moral (ethical) dilemma is not simply a question that requires you to make a decision of “What color outfit should I wear today,” or “Will the red or blue shoes best match my outfit?” Nor is a moral (ethical) dilemma a situation where you must decide between an action such as “Should I eat chocolate or vanilla ice cream for dessert” or “Should I read the introduction to my textbook or start with chapter one?” As far as I know, there is nothing immoral or unethical with eating either chocolate or vanilla ice cream for dessert or with skipping over the introduction and beginning with the first chapter of a book ( except, you might overlook some helpful information by not reading the introduction to your textbook).

The point is a moral (ethical) dilemma involves making a choice between two or more moral (ethical) values and in making a

decision or in taking action you will compromise or violate some other moral (ethical) principle(s) or value(s). A moral (ethical) dilemma is a situation that involves a choice, decision, act/action, solution that may include an unpleasant problem or situation where you feel you simply do not know what to do or which way to turn. When identifying what is or is not a moral (ethical) dilemma, we need to remember the key words here are “moral” or “ethical” (as a reminder, we are using these words interchangeably).

A response to a moral (ethical) dilemma is not always a matter of “right versus wrong,” as both courses of action or decision could seem moral or ethical (or the “right thing to do”). In some cases, it is a “right versus right” type of dilemma, which involves having to decide the better or best way to respond when faced with two or more “right” courses of action or decisions to select from. When faced with a moral (ethical) dilemma, you will probably be asking yourself “What should I do?” or “What ought I do now?” You may have a “little voice” inside your head telling you to do one thing, while your immediate desire is to do another. Some may refer to this “little voice” as your conscience, and you may be the type of person who is keenly aware of their own “moral compass.” Have you ever known what you “must do,” but simply did not “feel” like doing it? When faced with a situation like this, do you listen to that “little voice” and follow your moral compass? Or, do you simply do the first thing you think of, what most pleases you or others, or do nothing?

The “right versus wrong” ethical dilemmas, are not usually the ones we have a problem resolving (such as, “Should I cheat on a test?” or “Is it okay to harm an innocent person?”). It is the “right versus right” ethical dilemmas that seem to be the hardest to resolve.

**Let’s look at a few examples of what could be considered “right versus right” moral (ethical) dilemma:**

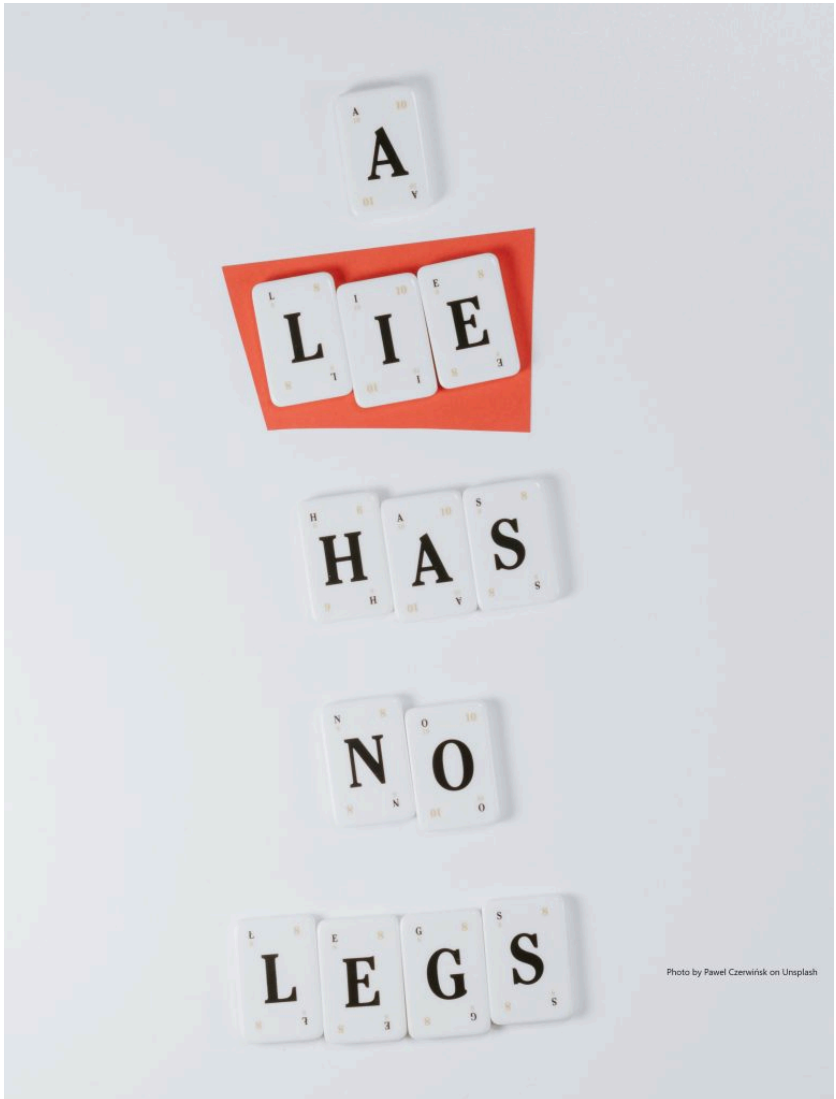


Photo by Pawel Czerwinski on Unsplash

- Your eighteen-year-old son/daughter confided in you that they had been involved in the recent theft of your neighbor's car. Should you call the police and turn your son/daughter in because you want to be honest with you

neighbor, as well as want to tell the truth? Or do you simply “keep quiet” because you want to remain loyal to your son/daughter, especially since they told you in confidence? (Think about truth versus loyalty when pondering this dilemma, such as in the relationship with your son/daughter and your neighbor.)



- You have a failing grade in your English class, and you were quite surprised when you received your final exam back. It shows you scored 100% on the exam, yet you cannot figure out how you even passed the exam. You did not study, and you totally guessed when completing the multiple-choice and true/false questions. There is no way you could have passed the final exam, and you were prepared to earn an F in the course. You had even planned to retake the course during the summer. You really need to pass this class to graduate. Upon reviewing

the exam, you notice the teacher made a big mistake in grading my exam. You should have earned an F on the final exam, and not the grade of 100%. Even with the grade of 100% on the final exam, you will barely pass the course with a D. The error in grading was not your fault, so you are wondering if you should say anything to your instructor about her big mistake in grading my final exam? If you say something, then you will fail the course and have to retake it in the summer. If you do not say anything, you can at least earn a D and not have to retake the course. (Think about the short- and long-term impact of this situation on you as the student, the instructor, and other students in the same course.)

Photo by United Nations COVID-19 Response on Unsplash





- You cannot stand wearing a mask due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It makes your glasses fog up and it is simply uncomfortable. You have not been feeling ill either. For the most part, you stay home and only venture out for occasional groceries. You live alone and do not live in a state or locality where wearing a mask is mandatory. Should you wear a mask when you occasionally go to the grocery store? When pondering this dilemma, consider that there's no law that makes it mandatory to wear a mask (such as, there is no law that applies to your state or community). Just because something is legal, still consider if it is ethical. (You should consider the impact of wearing or not wearing a mask in relationship to you as the individual, as compared to the community in which you live.)



- You are the manager of a restaurant and one of your long-term employees did not show up for work on a Friday night when your restaurant is slammed with

customers. This really put you in a jam, and you end up having to ask one of your other employees to work late to cover the shift for the missing employee. What is surprising to you is your long-term employee has never done this before. It was shocking they never called to let you know what happened and inform you they would not be coming in. The following morning the long-term employee shows up for their scheduled morning shift. You are not very happy because the employee acts like nothing happened, and did not even offer an explanation. In the employee handbook, there is a statement about zero tolerance for “no shows” when it comes to being at work ( this is really important on a Friday night too). The employee handbook further explains it is the employee’s responsibility to notify you prior to their scheduled work time/shift. What should you do? Do you immediately tell this long-term employee they are fired because it was very disrespectful to both you and the other employees, as well as making it difficult to provide quality service for customers because you were short-handed in terms of staff? Or, do you give this employee a chance to “redeem” themselves? (You should consider if you believe justice is served by enforcing the rules and holding employees accountable for their actions. Or, should you look with mercy on the wrongdoer since they are a long-term employee and perhaps give them another chance?)



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# *The Basics of Ethical Reasoning*

## **The Basics of Ethical Reasoning**

RADFORD UNIVERSITY, RADFORD UNIVERSITY CORE  
HANDBOOK, [HTTPS://LCUBBISON.PRESSBOOKS.COM/](https://lcubbison.pressbooks.com/)

### **Let's begin by refreshing our memory on what is meant by "ethics."**

Ethics is the study of the standards of right and wrong that inform us as to how we ought to behave. These standards relate to unwritten rules that are necessary for humans to live amongst each other, such as "don't hurt others." We function better as a society when we treat each other well.

Ethics can also refer to the standards themselves. They often pertain to rights, obligations, fairness, responsibilities, and specific virtues like honesty and loyalty.

They are supported by consistent and well-founded reasons; as such, they have universal appeal. It's never good to have a society that supports hurting others as a general rule; honesty and loyalty are positive attributes.

Can we think of instances when hurting others is condoned (such as in war) and where honesty or loyalty may be misplaced? Of course! That's one of the reasons why ethics are so complicated.

### **Next, let's briefly look at what is not "ethics."**

We need to distinguish ethics from what it is not. It's easier if you can remember that ethics doesn't change:

*Ethics is not what's legal.* The law often puts into writing our ethical standards (don't hurt others=don't commit homicide) but it also usually reflects our cultural beliefs at the time. For example, hunting is legal in Virginia, but it would be difficult to say that everyone agrees that it is ethical to hunt. Some people will argue that hunting is ethical because it manages the wildlife population, while others will argue that it is never ethical because it creates pain and suffering.

*Ethics is not what you feel.* In fact, most times our feelings are very egocentric: what's best for me and my nearest and dearest? But making judgments based on these sentiments could be detrimental to society as a whole,

*Ethics is not religion.* Religions may teach ethical standards, and you may personally use religion to guide your beliefs, but people can have ethics without necessarily belonging to a religion. Therefore, ethics and religion are not interchangeable.

*Ethics is not a political ideology.* A political party may share your values and offer ethical arguments to support its policies, but your decisions aren't automatically ethical, just because you belong to one political party or another. In fact, many, if not most, political debates are built from arguments that claim one aspect of an ethical dilemma is more significant than another.

*What does it mean to be ethical?*

When we explore what it means to be ethical, we are looking at what is rationally "right" and "wrong." We need to have such conversations so that we can live with other people in society. Philosophers would also argue that the best way to achieve our fullest potential is by being ethical.

In this course, we are not teaching you what to believe. We are building on the skills you learned in Core 201 to identify, evaluate, create and analyze ethical arguments.

**Again, let's look at the terms "ethical" and "moral" and examine if they mean the same thing.**

For the purposes of this course, the answer is 'yes'. The terms ethical and moral are often used as synonyms, and we will adopt this convention and use these terms interchangeably. For most purposes this works fine, but some authors and teachers do see a distinction between these ideas. Usually when the terms are distinguished it is because "morals" can connote very culture-specific norms or expectations. Hence "the mores of the Azande" describes the moral norms of that particular tribe or culture, but without expectation that these norms are universally valid. When "ethics" is contrasted with "morals," the writer is usually discussing certain normative ethical theories that maintain that certain principles, rules, or virtues have universal ethical validity. A slightly more comprehensive answer would describe the difference; say from an ethical relativist positions definition, as hinging on ethical standards being subjected to the scrutiny of reason or rationality as its fundamental method.

**What do we mean by "values"?**

Frequently when used in discussions of ethics the term values is used to refer to the fundamental ideals that an individual relies on to describe praise-worthy behavior. A person's values are the bedrock concepts used to determine their ethical decisions. Most generally speaking values represent aspirational goals common within your culture or society. Values such as honesty, benevolence, wisdom, duty, or compassion are universally recognized laudable and desirable features of a well-developed character. But which values are most important may differ from individual to individual, or across cultures. We could refer to the values of the feudal Japanese samurai culture placing the highest emphasis on the concept of personal honor. We could compare and contrast that with the European knightly virtues as a similar yet distinctively different set of cultural values. We could draw on political beliefs to describe the concepts of equality and freedom

at the heart of democratic ideals, contrasting them with a constitutional monarchy that perhaps places the highest importance on duty and tradition as its central political ideals

**Let's examine a few examples of ethical issues.**

Ethical issues abound in contemporary society. Ethical issues involve questions of the ethical rightness or wrongness of public policy or personal behavior. Actions or policies that affect other people always have an ethical dimension, but while some people restrict ethical issues to actions that can help or harm others (social ethics) others include personal and self-regarding conduct (personal ethics).

Many of today's most pressing issues of social ethics are complex and multifaceted and require clear and careful thought. Some of these issues include:

- Should states allow physician-assisted suicide?
- Is the death penalty an ethically acceptable type of punishment?
- Should animals have rights?
- Is society ever justified in regulating so-called victimless crimes like drug use, not wearing a helmet or a seatbelt, etc.?
- What are our responsibilities to future generations?
- Are affluent individuals and countries obligated to try to prevent starvation, malnutrition, and poverty wherever we find them in the world?
- Is there such a thing as a just war?
- How does business ethics relate to corporate responsibility?

To reach careful conclusions, these public policy issues require people to engage in complicated ethical reasoning, but the ethical

reasoning involving personal issues can be just as complex and multifaceted:

- What principles do I apply to the way I treat other people?
- What guides my own choices and my own goals in life?
- Should I have the same expectations of others in terms of their behavior and choices as I have of myself?
- Is living ethically compatible or incompatible with what I call living well or happily?

**Now you might be asking, “How can I effectively apply critical reasoning to an ethical issue?”**

People care quite a bit about ethical issues and often voice varied and even sharply opposed perspectives. So when looking at how we debate ethical issues publicly, it is not surprising to find debate ranging from formal to informal argumentation, and from very carefully constructed arguments with well-qualified conclusions, to very biased positions and quite fallacious forms of persuasion. It's easy to be dismayed by the discord we find over volatile issues like gun control, immigration policy, and equality in marriage or in the workplace, gender and race equality, abortion and birth control, jobs versus environment, freedom versus security, free speech and censorship, and so on. But it is also easy to go the other direction and be drawn into the often fallacious reasoning we hear all around us.

Critical thinkers want to conduct civil, respectful discourse, and to build bridges in ways that allow progress to be made on difficult issues of common concern. Progress and mutual understanding is not possible when name-calling, inflammatory language, and fallacies are the norm. Some mutual respect, together with the skill of being able to offer a clearly-structured argument for one's position, undercuts the need to resort to such tactics. So critical thinkers resist trading fallacy for fallacy, and try to introduce common ground that can help resolve disputes by remaining

respectful of differences, even about issues personally quite important to them. When we support a thesis (such as a position on one of the above ethical issues) with a clear and well-structured argument, we allow and invite others to engage with us in more constructive fashion. We say essentially, “Here is my thesis and here are my reasons for holding it. If you don’t agree with my claim, then show me what is wrong with my argument, and I will reconsider my view, as any rational person should.”

**Another question you may be asking is, “When I debate ethical issues, what is my responsibility to people who are part of the dialogue?”**

When we evaluate (analyze) somebody else’s position on an ethical issue, we are not free to simply reject out-of-hand a conclusion we don’t initially agree with. To be reasonable, we must accept the burden of showing where the other person errs in his facts or reasoning. If we cannot show that there are errors in the person’s facts or reasoning, to be reasonable we must reconsider whether we should reject the other person’s conclusion.

By applying the common standards of critical thinking to our reasoning about ethical issues, our arguments will become less emotionally driven and more rational. Our reasoning will become less dependent upon unquestioned beliefs or assumptions that the other people in the conversation may not accept. We become better able to contribute to progressive public debate and conflict resolution through a well-developed ability to articulate a well-reasoned position on an ethical issue.

**And, you might be thinking, “What are ethical judgments?”**

Ethical judgments are a subclass of value judgments. A value judgment involves an argument as to what is correct, superior, or preferable. In the case of ethics, the value judgment involves making a judgment, claim, or statement about whether an action is morally right or wrong or whether a person’s motives are morally good or bad. Ethical judgments often prescribe as well as evaluate actions, so that to state that someone (or perhaps everyone)



ethically “should” or “ought to” do something is also to make an ethical judgment.

**And you may be asking yourself, “How can I distinguish ethical judgments from other kinds of value judgments?”**

If ethical judgments are a subclass of value judgments, how do we distinguish them? Ethical judgments typically state that some action is good or bad, or right or wrong, in a specifically ethical sense. It is usually not difficult to distinguish non-ethical judgments of goodness and badness from ethical ones. When someone says “That was a good action, because it was caring,” or “That was bad action, because it was cruel” they are clearly intending goodness or badness in a distinctly ethical sense.

By contrast, non-moral value judgments typically say that something is good (or bad) simply for the kind of thing it is; or that some action is right or wrong, given the practical goal or purpose that one has in mind. “That’s a good car” or “That’s a bad bike” would not be considered to moral judgments about those objects. Goodness and badness here are still value judgments, but value judgments that likely track features like comfort, styling, reliability, safety and mileage ratings, etc.

The use of “should” or “ought to” for non-moral value judgments is also easy to recognize. “You ought to enroll early” or “You made the right decision to go to college” are value-judgments, but no one would say they are ethical judgments. They reflect a concern with wholly practical aims rather than ethical ones and with the best way to attain those practical aims.

**Let’s end by looking at what is meant by the term “ethical arguments.”**

Ethical arguments are arguments whose conclusion makes an ethical judgment. Ethical arguments are most typically arguments that try to show a certain policy or behavior to be either ethical or unethical. Suppose you want to argue that “The death penalty is unjust (or just) punishment” for a certain range of violent crimes. Here we have an ethical judgment, and one that with a bit more

detail could serve as the thesis of a position paper on the death penalty debate.

An ethical judgment rises above mere opinion and becomes the conclusion of an ethical argument when you support it with ethical reasoning. You must say why you hold the death penalty to be ethically right or wrong, just or unjust. For instance, you might argue that it is unjust because of one or more of the reasons below:

- It is cruel, and cruel actions are wrong.
- Two wrongs don't make a right.
- It disrespects human life.
- In some states the penalty falls unevenly on members of a racial group.
- The penalty sometimes results in the execution of innocent people.

Of course you could also give reasons to support the view that the death penalty is a just punishment for certain crimes. The point is that whichever side of the debate you take, your ethical argument should develop ethical reasons and principles rather than economic or other practical but non-moral concerns. To argue merely that the death penalty be abolished because that would save us all money is a possible policy-position, but it is essentially an economic argument rather than an ethical argument.



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# *Moral Values in Everyday Life: The Moral Dilemma Behind Self-Driving Cars*

## **Moral Values in Everyday Life: The Moral Dilemma Behind Self-Driving Cars**

LEVIN, N. (2019). THE “TROLLEY PROBLEM” AND SELF-DRIVING CARS: YOUR CAR’S MORAL SETTINGS. IN N. [HTTPS://WWW.NGEFARPRESS.COM/](https://www.ngefarpress.com/)

We have examined the role of moral values in everyday life, and we will now look at how moral values must be taken into consideration when faced with a moral problem/dilemma. For the sake of defining a moral dilemma, this is a situation where you must make a choice (hopefully, the better or best choice) between two or more moral values. To help understand how this can occur in everyday life, we will examine *The “Trolley Problem” and Self-Driving Cars: Your Car’s Moral Settings*, which is a fictional short story about potential moral settings for self-driving cars in the near future.

### **The “Trolley Problem” and Self-Driving Cars: Your Car’s Moral Settings**

“We have decided to put the moral decisions related to our crash-

avoidance and self-driving features into the hands of the consumer. After all, it is your vehicle and you will be behind the wheel. Or maybe you won't be. Our proprietary system allows for you to customize all settings depending on who is in the vehicle, who is driving, and what conditions present themselves on the road," Bob, the salesman, told Hillary.

"What do you mean 'moral decisions'?" Hillary asked.

"There's a classic problem in philosophy known as 'The Trolley Problem' and it's a simple version of a scenario we like to analyze to help determine your settings. Are you familiar with it? No? It can help explain what we have in mind, so it's a good starting point. Let me show you how it works," Bob said as he touched his screen a few times causing a holographic projection of a red trolley (the type that were still in use on the streets of San Francisco) to appear on the table between them.

"You see, this is a runaway trolley and it's flying downhill on the track. There's a fork ahead and it's headed toward the path to the right. You happen to be standing at the trolley tracks and your hand is on the lever controlling the fork, so you can choose which track it goes down," Bob explained as the hologram zoomed out a little to reveal the fork in the tracks while a lever appeared in front of Hillary indicating the switch would currently send the trolley down the right path.

"OK, so what's the issue? There's no one in the trolley and I don't know where it wants to go, so what do I need to do?" Hillary asked, a little intrigued by the simulation. She hadn't bought a car in years and was unprepared for both the sophisticated level of technology in her potential vehicle and the tactics used by the salesman.

"Correct, there's no one in the trolley, but there are people down both of the tracks. You see, a mad philosopher – I know, bear with me, this was popularized by the philosopher Judith Jarvis Thompson after all – has tied down a number of people. Specifically, there are 5 people on the track the trolley is headed down and 1 on the other track," Bob said as the hologram zoomed

out further to show the situation. All 6 of the people on the tracks had indiscernible features to the point that Hillary couldn't make out any details, not even general age or gender.

"Now, you have a decision to make," Bob continued as the trolley slowly rolled toward the fork. "You can do one of two things: nothing or pull the switch. If you do nothing, the trolley will kill the 5 people. If you act and pull the lever, then the trolley will switch tracks and kill the single person. What will you do? All you need to do is pull that switch to change the track."

"Those can't be the only two options. Can I shout at those people? Untie them in time? Hop on the trolley and pull the brakes? Put the switch in the middle so the trolley derails?" she said as she delicately moved the switch trying to get it to stick in the middle, having no luck.

"Nope! There are only those two options. Anything else you try to do won't work, and will take up any time you have to make a decision which would mean the trolley will continue down its track and kill the 5 people. That's the point of this: you must choose between those two options," Bob said.

Hillary thought as the trolley continued on its path toward the fork. It didn't take her much longer to deliberate, and she set the lever to the track with the 1 person on it.

"Well, it's kill 1 or 5, right? I'd rather less people die. This is all really the fault of the 'Mad Philosopher' anyway," she stated.

"Most people make the decision you just made, and for those same reasons. However, there's something to think about: rather than saving those 5 people, did you just kill 1? After all, that person wasn't going to die until you did anything," Bob asked.

"In some sense, I suppose I did, but someone was going to die. If I didn't do anything, then those 5 people would die, and there was something I could have done to prevent that. It's unfortunate for that one person, but I'd hope they would understand," she stated.

"There are those people that believe there is a big moral difference between allowing something to happen and doing it

yourself. But I can tell that you don't think so. Whatever happens in this situation is in your hands, and you're ultimately partly responsible for the results it would seem. That's why it's so important that you think about what settings you want to use in your new car," Bob stated.

"But what settings are there exactly? If it's just to choose how many people to save, then that's easy: save more people. Why wouldn't I pick that option?" Hillary asked.

"Great question! Let's change this up a little. Instead of the train heading down the track with the 5 people, it's headed down the track with only 1 person," as Bob said this, the 5 people shifted to the other track in the hologram, but the track the trolley was headed down remained empty.

"Now, Hillary, I don't mean any offense by this, and I don't want you to be shocked, but we've found this to be very effective at helping you decide which settings are correct for you and your family," and, as he said this, a little girl just five-years-old appeared on the track the Trolley was headed down.

"Vanessa? What is she doing there? Why is *my daughter* in your little game?!" she shouted.

"My apologies, I'll take her out," as he said this, the girl was replaced with a boy version of Vanessa. "You get the point. What would you do if you had to choose between the life of your daughter and 5 strangers?" Bob asked.

"Well, my daughter, of course! What kind of monster would kill their own child?" Hillary shouted again.

"Of course you would save her. But remember what you had just said about saving more lives than less – that only matters to you when you don't know anything about the people that might be killed. Now, I assure you, that there are people that choose to, sadly enough, sacrifice their own child to save those 5 lives. It's not an easy decision to make, but they believe their child would want to make that sacrifice," Bob said, attempting to calm Hillary. He was clearly used to these sorts of reactions.

"I really don't see what this has to do with my new car. When would my daughter be in the road and the only way to avoid her is by killing 5 strangers? And where am I? I'm not even a part of this. I'm just standing on the outside," Hillary asked.

"You're right! You are not really involved in this situation, so it isn't exactly something that might happen when you're driving your new car. This is why we've devised a different scenario to help you understand the actual options in our moral decision-making algorithm and choose the most appropriate parameters for your family. The Trolley Problem was just the beginning so you can better appreciate this scenario," Bob said as he began tapping at his screen once again. The holographic simulation of the trolley disappeared and the minivan that Hillary was considering appeared driving down a curvy mountain road.

"Now, let's say you're out for a relaxing mountain drive. You need some time to yourself and just needed to get away, so you're blasting your favorite tunes on our 12-speaker award-winning sound system using our safety assist driving mode, which puts you in control but keeps an eye on things so that you don't get into an accident, not that you would, but just in case you lose yourself too much in your music, the car has you covered. Suddenly, you turn a corner and see a family of 5 standing in the middle of the road since they just emerged from their wrecked car when it hit a boulder that had recently fallen off the mountainside. They were driving a very old car that didn't have the latest auto-braking technologies, but had all thankfully survived with only minor injuries. You're in control of the wheel and have just enough time to react. You see that there are only 2 options: smash into the back of their car and risk serious injury to yourself or avoid it and hit the family. Plunging off the cliff would be certain death (we don't have ejection seats – yet!), so it's either hit the family or take your chances crashing. Our safety systems are topnotch and we receive the highest crash rating year after year. But you never know what's going to happen in an accident like this. The family might be fine as well if you hit

them or they might jump out of the way in time, but they aren't surrounded by 7 different airbags like you are. Now, what would you do?" As Bob explained the scenario, the hologram changed to match. Only instead of a switch, there were two buttons in front of Hillary: one that said "Hit the car" and another that said "Hit the family."

"I can't help but see my family standing there when I look at these people. I couldn't hit them, so I'd take the chance on myself," Hillary said as she pushed the button indicating her choice. The hologram stopped just before impact.

"That's quite noble of you. But – now, again, don't be shocked – what if *your family* were in the car with you? Let's keep it limited. Not your entire family, but just you and...Vanessa, was it?" Bob asked, now sounding more like a casket salesman than a car salesman.

"I can't risk her like I will risk myself. My job as a parent is to protect her. That family shouldn't have been standing in the middle of the road anyway, so it wouldn't be entirely my fault," she stated, reassuring herself of her decision.

"Of course, I understand. From what you've said, it sounds like you're interested in our most popular settings, which a full 91% of new car owners choose. There are a lot of options, but I can summarize how it will work out in the real world for you, if you like," Bob said as a list with at least 50 checkboxes appeared in place of the simulation.

"Please, go on," Hillary said.

"You're willing to sacrifice yourself for the sake of others – again, that's very commendable of you – and always want to save the most lives that you can, unless your family is on the line—" Bob said before Hillary interrupted him.

"No, not my entire family, just children. Nephews, nieces, and any other kids included," Hillary clarified.

"And grandchildren someday, of course! My apologies, I misspoke. Yes, we will prioritize the lives of any children in your new vehicle, but count adults in your vehicle the same as those



outside of it. While we're on the topic, should we also prioritize the lives of children outside the car as well? We can put whatever weighting on them you like when the system does its calculations in the unfortunate event of unavoidable catastrophe. Most customers opt for a 2:1 value ratio – minors count twice as much as adults. However, we do have customers that value the elderly at a higher rate. We can set the parameters however you want, and we need not make these decisions now," Bob said.

"2:1 for children under 15, and 1.5:1 for children between 16-21. Anyone older than that can fend for themselves," Hillary stated.

"Yes, of course. You can always change your LVRs, Life Value Ratios, later, and tune them exactly to your liking based on whatever traits you choose to specify. There's even a specific setting for ex-husbands!" Bob joked. Hillary let out a forced chuckle.

"Sorry, to continue, the system will prioritize the most lives, weighted to your specifications, weighing adults inside and outside the vehicle the same, but giving a higher value to children, and giving those in the car the highest values. There is also a setting that will give the occupants in the car priority in the event the algorithm results in a tie. Sound good?" Bob explained.

"Yes, that sounds quite good. Does a sunroof come standard?" Hillary inquired. All this safety talk was getting tedious, and she suddenly remembered how much she enjoyed the sunroof on her old car.

### **Questions to Ponder:**

1. What are your thoughts on the "classic" Trolley Problem? Would you switch the track (to kill the one person) or let it kill the five people? Do you think there is a difference between "doing" and "allowing" in this scenario?
2. What moral settings would you use on your self-driving car and why?
3. Who would be responsible for a fatal accident in the event

that a self-driving car injures someone because it made a decision based upon a moral algorithm? The driver? The car company? Nobody? Why?



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## CHAPTER 13

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# *Iyad Rahawn/TEDxCambridge What Moral Decisions Should Driverless Cars Make?*

IYAD RAHAWN/TEDXCAMBRIDGE WHAT MORAL DECISIONS  
SHOULD DRIVERLESS CARS MAKE? [HTTPS://WWW.TED.COM/  
TALKS/  
IYAD\\_RAHWAN\\_WHAT\\_MORAL\\_DECISIONS\\_SHOULD\\_DRIVERLESS  
\\_CARS\\_MAKE#T-13525](https://www.ted.com/talks/IYAD_RAHWAN_WHAT_MORAL_DECISIONS_SHOULD_DRIVERLESS_CARS_MAKE#T-13525)

To gain a deeper understanding of the moral dilemmas/decisions behind self-driving cars watch the following video:

*Iyad Rahawn/TEDxCambridge What Moral Decisions Should Driverless Cars Make? (13 minutes and 11 seconds in length)*



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# *"The Discipline of Ethics"*

## *Learning Unit – Self-Check – Dialog Cards*

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## **PART IV**

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# **MORAL REASONING**





## CHAPTER 15

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# *Moral Reasoning - Content Learning Outcomes*

### **Moral Reasoning - Content Learning Outcomes**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

By the end of this learning unit, student will be able to:

- Explain the role of logic in ethics.
- Distinguish between deductive and inductive arguments.
- Evaluate the quality of deductive and inductive arguments and identify fallacious reasoning.
- Distinguish between moral and nonmoral claims and discuss the role that each plays in moral reasoning.

## CHAPTER 16

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### *What is Logic?*

KNACHEL, MATTHEW, "FUNDAMENTAL METHODS OF LOGIC"  
(2017). PHILOSOPHY FACULTY BOOKS. 1.  
[HTTP://DC.UWM.EDU/PHIL\\_FACBOOKS/1](http://dc.uwm.edu/phil_facbooks/1)



### **What Is Logic?**

In Logic, the object of study is reasoning. This is an activity that humans engage in—when we make claims and back them up with reasons, or when we make inferences about what follows from a set of statements. Like many human activities, reasoning can be done well, or it can be done badly. The goal of logic is to distinguish good reasoning from bad. Good reasoning is not necessarily effective reasoning; in fact, as we shall see, bad reasoning is pervasive and often extremely effective—in the sense that people are often persuaded by it. In Logic, the standard of goodness is not effectiveness in the sense of persuasiveness, but rather correctness according to logical rules. In logic, we study the rules and techniques that allow us to distinguish good, correct reasoning from bad, incorrect reasoning. Since there is a variety of different types of reasoning, since it's possible to develop various methods for evaluating each of those types, and since there are different views on what constitutes correct reasoning, there are many approaches to the logical enterprise. We talk of logic, but also of logics. A logic is just a set of rules and techniques for distinguishing good reasoning from bad. The object of study in logic is human reasoning, with the goal of distinguishing the good from the bad. It is important to note that this approach sets logic apart from an alternative way of studying human reasoning, one more proper to a different discipline: psychology. It is possible to study human reasoning in a merely descriptive mode: to identify common patterns of reasoning and explore their psychological causes, for example. This is not logic. Logic takes up reasoning in a prescriptive mode: it tells how we ought to reason, not merely how we in fact typically do.

Self-Check:



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## *What is the Role of Logic in Ethics? - The Inseparability of Logic and Ethics*

### **What is the Role of Logic in Ethics? - The Inseparability of Logic and Ethics**

JOHN CORCORAN 1989. THE INSEPARABILITY OF LOGIC AND ETHICS, FREE INQUIRY, SPRING, 37-40. >  
[HTTPS://WWW.ACADEMIA.EDU/9413409/INSEPARABILITY\\_OF\\_LOGIC\\_AND\\_ETHICS](https://www.academia.edu/9413409/INSEPARABILITY_OF_LOGIC_AND_ETHICS)

To gain an understanding of the role of logic in ethics, please read John Corcoran's "The Inseparability of Logic and Ethics":

[The Inseparability of Logic and Ethics by John Corcoran](#)

ABSTRACT: This essay takes logic and ethics in broad senses: logic as the science of evidence; ethics as the science of justice. One of its main conclusions is that neither science can be fruitfully pursued without the virtues fostered by the other: logic is pointless without fairness and compassion; ethics is pointless without rigor and objectivity. The logician's advice to be dispassionate is in resonance and harmony with the ethicist's advice us to be compassionate.

The journal article included here is written in English, and 11 Translations are posted on ACADEMIA.EDU: Arabic, Dutch, Greek, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Persian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Ukrainian. More would be welcome. Translators for other languages are needed.

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# *Deductive and Inductive Arguments*

KNACHEL, MATTHEW, "FUNDAMENTAL METHODS OF LOGIC" (2017). PHILOSOPHY FACULTY BOOKS. 1.  
[HTTP://DC.UWM.EDU/PHIL\\_FACBOOKS/1](http://dc.uwm.edu/phil_facbooks/1)

As we noted earlier, there are different logics—different approaches to distinguishing good arguments from bad ones. One of the reasons we need different logics is that there are different kinds of arguments. In this section, we distinguish two types: deductive and inductive arguments.

### **Deductive Arguments**

First, deductive arguments. These are distinguished by their aim: a deductive argument attempts to provide premises that guarantee, necessitate its conclusion. Success for a deductive argument, then, does not come in degrees: either the premises do in fact guarantee the conclusion, in which case the argument is a good, successful one, or they don't, in which case it fails. Evaluation of deductive arguments is a black-and-white, yes-or-no affair; there is no middle ground.

We have a special term for a successful deductive argument: we call it valid. Validity is a central concept in the study of logic. It's so



important, we're going to define it three times. Each of these three definitions is equivalent to the others; they are just three different ways of saying the same thing:

An argument is valid just in case... (i) its premises guarantee its conclusion; i.e., (ii) IF its premises are true, then its conclusion must also be true; i.e., (iii) it is impossible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false. Here's an example of a valid deductive argument:

All humans are mortal.

Socrates is a human.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

This argument is valid because the premises do in fact guarantee the conclusion: if they're true (as a matter of fact, they are), then the conclusion must be true; it's impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.

Here's a surprising fact about validity: what makes a deductive argument valid has nothing to do with its content; rather, validity is determined by the argument's form. That is to say, what makes our Socrates argument valid is not that it says a bunch of accurate things about Socrates, humanity, and mortality. The content doesn't make a difference. Instead, it's the form that matters—the pattern that the argument exhibits.

Here's what that looks like for our Socrates argument:

All A are B.

x is A.

Therefore, x is B.

The letter are the blanks: they're placeholders, variables. As a matter of convention, we're using capital letters to stand for groups of things (humans, mortals) and lower-case letters to stand for individual things (Socrates).

The Socrates argument is a good, valid argument because it exhibits this good, valid form. Our third way of wording the definition of validity helps us see why this is a valid form: it's impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false, in

that it's impossible to plug in terms for A, B, and x in such a way that the premises come out true and the conclusion comes out false.

A consequence of the fact that validity is determined entirely by an argument's form is that, given a valid form, every single argument that has that form will be valid. So any argument that has the same form as our Socrates argument will be valid; that is, we can pick things at random to stick in for A, B, and x, and we're guaranteed to get a valid argument. Here's a silly example:

All apples are bananas.

Todd is an apple.

Therefore, Todd is a banana.\*

This argument has the same form as the Socrates argument: we simply replaced A with 'apples', B with 'bananas', and x with 'Todd'. That means it's a valid argument. That's a strange thing to say, since the argument is just silly—but it's the form that matters, not the content. Our second way of wording the definition of validity can help us here. The standard for validity is this: IF the premises are true, then the conclusion must be. That's a big 'IF'. In this case, as a matter of fact, the premises are not true (they're silly, plainly false). However, IF they were true—if in fact apples were a type of banana and Todd were an apple—then the conclusion would be unavoidable: Todd would have to be a banana. The premises aren't true, but if they were, the conclusion would have to be—that's validity.

So it turns out that the actual truth or falsehood of the propositions in a valid argument are completely irrelevant to its validity. The Socrates argument has all true propositions and it's valid; the Todd argument has all false propositions, but it's valid, too. They're both valid because they have a valid form; the truth/falsity of their propositions don't make any difference. This means that a valid argument can have propositions with almost any combination of truthvalues: some true premises, some false ones, a true or false conclusion. One can fiddle around with the Socrates' argument's form, plugging different things in for A, B, and x, and

see that this is so. For example, plug in 'ants' for A, 'bugs' for B, and Bertha for x: you get one true premise (All ants are bugs), one false one (Bertha is an ant), and a false conclusion (Bertha is a bug). Plug in other things and you can get any other combination of truth-values.\*

Any combination, that is, but one: you'll never get true premises and a false conclusion. That's because the Socrates' argument's form is a valid one; by definition, it's impossible to generate true premises and a false conclusion in that case.

This irrelevance of truth-value to judgments about validity means that those judgments are immune to revision. That is, once we decide whether an argument is valid or not, that decision cannot be changed by the discovery of new information. New information might change our judgment about whether a particular proposition in our argument is true or false, but that can't change our judgment about validity. Validity is determined by the argument's form, and new information can't change the form of an argument. The Socrates argument is valid because it has a valid form. Suppose we discovered, say, that as a matter of fact Socrates wasn't a human being at all, but rather an alien from outer space who got a kick out of harassing random people on the streets of ancient Athens. That information would change the argument's second premise—Socrates is human—from a truth to a falsehood. But it wouldn't make the argument invalid. The form is still the same, and it's a valid one.

It's time to face up to an awkward consequence of our definition of validity. Remember, logic is about evaluating arguments—saying whether they're good or bad. We've said that for deductive arguments, the standard for goodness is validity: the good deductive arguments are the valid ones. Here's where the awkwardness comes in: because validity is determined by form, it's possible to generate valid arguments that are nevertheless completely ridiculous sounding on their face. Remember, the Todd argument—where we concluded that he's a banana—is valid. In

other words, we're saying that the Todd argument is good; it's valid, so it gets the logical thumbs up. But that's nuts! The Todd argument is obviously bad, in some sense of 'bad', right? It's a collection of silly, nonsensical claims.

We need a new concept to specify what's wrong with the Todd argument. That concept is soundness. This is a higher standard of argument-goodness than validity; in order to meet it, an argument must satisfy two conditions.

An argument is sound just in case (i) it's valid, AND (ii) its premises are in fact true.

What about the conclusion? Does it have to be true? Yes: remember, for valid arguments, if the premises are true, the conclusion has to be. Sound arguments are valid, so it goes without saying that the conclusion is true, provided that the premises are.

The Todd argument, while valid, is not sound, because it fails to satisfy the second condition: its premises are both false. The Socrates argument, however, which is valid and contains nothing but truths (Socrates was not in fact an alien), is sound.

The question now naturally arises: if soundness is a higher standard of argument-goodness than validity, why didn't we say that in the first place? Why so much emphasis on validity? The answer is this: we're doing logic here, and as logicians, we have no special insight into the soundness of arguments. Or rather, we should say that as logicians, we have only partial expertise on the question of soundness. Logic can tell us whether or not an argument is valid, but it cannot tell us whether or not it is sound. Logic has no special insight into the second condition for soundness, the actual truth-values of premises. To take an example from the silly Todd argument, suppose you weren't sure about the truth of the first premise, which claims that all apples are bananas (you have very little experience with fruit, apparently). How would you go about determining whether that claim was true or false? Whom would you ask? Well, this is a pretty easy one, so you could ask pretty much anybody, but the point is this: if you weren't sure

about the relationship between apples and bananas, you wouldn't think to yourself, "I better go find a logician to help me figure this out." Propositions make claims about how things are in the world. To figure out whether they're true or false, you need to consult experts in the relevant subject-matter. Most claims aren't about logic, so logic is very little help in determining truth-values. Since logic can only provide insight into the validity half of the soundness question, we focus on validity and leave soundness to one side.

Returning to validity, then, we're now in a position to do some actual logic. Given what we know, we can demonstrate invalidity; that is, we can prove that an invalid argument is invalid, and therefore bad (it can't be sound, either; the first condition for soundness is validity, so if the argument's invalid, the question of actual truth-values doesn't even come up). Here's how:

To demonstrate the invalidity of an argument, one must write a down a new argument with the same form as the original, whose premises are in fact true and whose conclusion is in fact false. This new argument is called a counterexample.

Let's look at an example. The following argument is invalid:

Some mammals are swimmers.

All whales are swimmers.

Therefore, all whales are mammals.

Now, it's not really obvious that the argument is invalid. It does have one thing going for it: all the claims it makes are true. But we know that doesn't make any difference, since validity is determined by the argument's form, not its content. If this argument is invalid, it's invalid because it has a bad, invalid form. This is the form:

Some A are B.

All C are B.

Therefore, all C are A.

To prove that the original whale argument is invalid, we have to show that this form is invalid. For a valid form, we learned, it's impossible to plug things into the blanks and get true premises and a false conclusion; so for an invalid form, it's possible to plug

things into the blanks and get that result. That's how we generate our counterexample: we plug things in for A, B, and C so that the premises turn out true and the conclusion turns out false. There's no real method here; you just use your imagination to come up with an A, B, and C that give the desired result.

Possibly helpful hint: universal generalizations (All \_\_\_ are \_\_\_) are rarely true, so if you have to make one true, as in this example, it might be good to start there; likewise, particular claims (Some \_\_\_ are \_\_\_) are rarely false, so if you have to make one false—you don't in this particular example, but if you had one as a conclusion, you would—that would be a good place to start.

Here's a counterexample:

Some lawyers are American citizens.

All members of Congress are American citizens.

Therefore, all members of Congress are lawyers

For A, we inserted 'lawyers', for B we chose 'American citizens', and for C, 'members of Congress'. The first premise is clearly true. The second premise is true: non-citizens aren't eligible to be in Congress. And the conclusion is false: there are lots of people in Congress who are nonlawyers—doctors, businesspeople, etc.

That's all we need to do to prove that the original whale-argument is invalid: come up with one counterexample, one way of filling in the blanks in its form to get true premises and a false conclusion. We only have to prove that it's possible to get true premises and a false conclusion, and for that, you only need one example.

What's far more difficult is to prove that a particular argument is valid. To do that, we'd have to show that its form is such that it's impossible to generate a counterexample, to fill in the blanks to get true premises and a false conclusion. Proving that it's possible is easy; you only need one counterexample. Proving that it's impossible is hard; in fact, at first glance, it looks impossibly hard! What do you do? Check all the possible ways of plugging things into the blanks, and make sure that none of them turn out to

have true premises and a false conclusion? That's nuts! There are, literally, infinitely many ways to fill in the blanks in an argument's form. Nobody has the time to check infinitely many potential counterexamples.

Well, take heart; it's still early. For now, we're able to do a little bit of deductive logic: given an invalid argument, we can demonstrate that it is in fact invalid.

### **Inductive Arguments**

That's all we'll say for now about deductive arguments. On to the other type of argument we're introducing in this section: inductive arguments. These are distinguished from their deductive cousins by their relative lack of ambition. Whereas deductive arguments aim to give premises that guarantee/necessitate the conclusion, inductive arguments are more modest: they aim merely to provide premises that make the conclusion more probable than it otherwise would be; they aim to support the conclusion, but without making it unavoidable.

Here is an example of an inductive argument:

I'm telling you, you're not going to die taking a plane to visit us. Airplane crashes happen far less frequently than car crashes, for example; so you're taking a bigger risk if you drive. In fact, plane crashes are so rare, you're far more likely to die from slipping in the bathtub. You're not going to stop taking showers, are you?

The speaker is trying to convince her visitor that he won't die in a plane crash on the way to visit her. That's the conclusion: you won't die. This claim is supported by the others—which emphasize how rare plane crashes are—but it is not guaranteed by them. After all, plane crashes sometimes do happen. Instead, the premises give reasons to believe that the conclusion—you won't die—is very probable.

Since inductive arguments have a different, more modest goal than their deductive cousins, it would be unreasonable for us to

apply the same evaluative standards to both kinds of argument. That is, we can't use the terms 'valid' and 'invalid' to apply to inductive arguments. Remember, for an argument to be valid, its premises must guarantee its conclusion. But inductive arguments don't even try to provide a guarantee of the conclusion; technically, then, they're all invalid. But that won't do. We need a different evaluative vocabulary to apply to inductive arguments. We will say of inductive arguments that they are (relatively) strong or weak, depending on how probable their conclusions are in light of their premises. One inductive argument is stronger than another when its conclusion is more probable than the other, given their respective premises.

One consequence of this difference in evaluative standards for inductive and deductive arguments is that for the former, unlike the latter, our evaluations are subject to revision in light of new evidence. Recall that since the validity or invalidity of a deductive argument is determined entirely by its form, as opposed to its content, the discovery of new information could not affect our evaluation of those arguments. The Socrates argument remained valid, even if we discovered that Socrates was in fact an alien. Our evaluations of inductive arguments, though, are not immune to revision in this way. New information might make the conclusion of an inductive argument more or less probable, and so we would have to revise our judgment accordingly, saying that the argument is stronger or weaker. Returning to the example above about plane crashes, suppose we were to discover that the FBI in the visitor's hometown had recently been hearing lots of "chatter" from terrorist groups active in the area, with strong indications that they were planning to blow up a passenger plane. Yikes! This would affect our estimation of the probability of the conclusion of the argument—that the visitor wasn't going to die in a crash. The probability of not dying goes down (as the probability of dying goes up). This new information would trigger a re-evaluation of the argument, and we would say it's now weaker. If, on the other hand,



we were to learn that the airline that flies between the visitor's and the speaker's towns had recently upgraded its entire fleet, getting rid of all of its older planes, replacing them with newer, more reliable model, while in addition instituting a new, more thorough and rigorous program of pre- and post-flight safety and maintenance inspections—well, then we might revise our judgment in the other direction. Given this information, we might judge that things are even safer for the visitor as it regards plane travel; that is, the proposition that the visitor won't die is now even more probable than it was before. This new information would strengthen the argument to that conclusion.

Reasonable follow-up question: how much is the argument strengthened or weakened by the new information imagined in these scenarios? Answer: how should I know? Sorry, that's not very helpful. But here's the point: we're talking about probabilities here; sometimes it's hard to know what the probability of something happening really is. Sometimes it's not: if I flip a coin, I know that the probability of it coming up tails is 0.5. But how probable is it that a particular plane from Airline X will crash with our hypothetical visitor on board? I don't know. And how much more probable is a disaster on the assumption of increased terrorist chatter? Again, I have no idea. All I know is that the probability of dying on the plane goes up in that case. And in the scenario in which Airline X has lots of new planes and security measures, the probability of a crash goes down. Sometimes, with inductive arguments, all we can do is make relative judgments about strength and weakness: in light of these new facts, the conclusion is more or less probable than it was before we learned of the new facts. Sometimes, however, we can be precise about probabilities and make absolute judgments about strength and weakness: we can say precisely how probable a conclusion.

*\*The names in the argument have been changed from the original names found in the original source.*



Deductive and Inductive Arguments by Knachel, Matthew, "Fundamental Methods of Logic" (2017). Philosophy Faculty Books. 1. [http://dc.uwm.edu/phil\\_facbooks/1](http://dc.uwm.edu/phil_facbooks/1) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

# *The Logical Structure of an Argument: Examine the Quality of Deductive & Inductive Arguments*

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### **What is inductive reasoning?**

You have been employing inductive reasoning for a very long time. Inductive reasoning is based on your ability to recognize meaningful patterns and connections. By taking into account both examples and your understanding of how the world works, induction allows you to conclude that something is likely to be true. By using induction, you move from specific data to a generalization that tries to capture what the data ‘mean’.

Imagine that you ate a dish of strawberries and soon afterward your lips swelled. Now imagine that a few weeks later you ate strawberries and soon afterwards your lips again became swollen. The following month, you ate yet another dish of strawberries, and you had the same reaction as formerly. You are aware that swollen

lips can be a sign of an allergy to strawberries. Using induction, you conclude that, more likely than not, you are allergic to strawberries.

Data: After I ate strawberries, my lips swelled (1st time).

Data: After I ate strawberries, my lips swelled (2nd time).

Data: After I ate strawberries, my lips swelled (3rd time).

Warrant\*: Swollen lips after eating strawberries may be a sign of an allergy.

Claim\*\*: Likely I am allergic to strawberries.

\*A warrant is a concept that, when applied to the data, leads to the claim. It is the “understanding of how the world works” mentioned in the paragraph above.

\*\*Alternately, the claim may be referred to as the conclusion. You may also find that some discussions of induction use the word premises to refer to data.

### **What are the limitations of inductive reasoning?**

Inductive reasoning can never lead to absolute certainty. Instead, induction allows you to say that, given the data and the warrant, the claim more likely than not is true. Because of the limitations of inductive reasoning, a claim will be more credible if multiple lines of reasoning are presented in its support.

When applying inductive reasoning, always keep in mind that the better and more complete the data and the more relevant the warrant, the likelier it is that the claim will be credible. For example, medical researchers report their results with greater confidence if they can say the following about participants in a study: that the participants were a representative sample and that the sample size was a large one. The larger and more representative a sample, the less likely it is that the results arose out of random variation.

Also keep in mind that the results of inductive thinking can be skewed if relevant data or warrants are overlooked. In the previous example, inductive reasoning was used to conclude that I am likely allergic to strawberries after suffering multiple instances of my lips swelling. Would I be as confident in my claim if I was eating strawberry shortcake on each of those occasions? It is reasonable

to assume that the allergic reaction might be due to another ingredient besides strawberries?

This example illustrates that inductive reasoning must be used with care. When evaluating an inductive argument, consider:

- the amount of the data,
- the quality of the data,
- the existence of additional data,
- the relevance of the warrant, and
- the existence of additional warrants.

What is required for appropriate cause and effect reasoning?

One type of inductive argument involves reasoning about causes and effects. To argue credibly that one event is the cause of another, a speaker or writer must be careful not to confuse correlation with causation.

Humans seek meaning and therefore tend to ‘see’ patterns where none exist. This meaning-seeking phenomenon includes ‘finding’ causal patterns in what is actually nothing more than correlation—the coincidental occurrence of two or more events.

If events regularly occur within the same time frame, an observer may conclude that one event causes another. For example, April has a reputation for rain; during this rainy month, income taxes come due. Still, the rain does not cause taxes to come due; nor is tax season the cause of spring showers.

Confusing correlation with causation may cause great harm, as when parents stop vaccinating children because of a weak correlation between vaccine administration and the age at which children are typically diagnosed with autism. A perceived pattern has been mistaken for causation.

Since humans are prone to see patterns, claims about causation need to meet a scientific standard that goes well beyond reliance upon intuition.

### **What is required for an appropriate generalization?**

Generalization may be the approach that people have in mind when they think of inductive reasoning. To generalize, a person

begins with particular observations and then pools those individual observations in order to draw a conclusion that accounts for all the individual cases. For example, a person observing swans on a number of occasions may notice that each swan is white. Pooling these observations may lead him to the generalization that “All swans are white.”

Generalizations rarely lead to absolute certainty. They are subject to revision because they are based on a sample (reported swan sightings) rather than on direct observation of all possible evidence (a tally of every swan in the world). Because the generalization is based on a sample, it could be falsified any time additional evidence turns up that is not consistent with the claim. (As a matter of fact, there are black swans in Australia.)

However, if the sample is large enough and representative of the target population, inductive generalization can be a very powerful—even essential—tool.

### **What is deductive reasoning?**

Deductive reasoning is built on two statements whose logical relationship should lead to a third statement that is an unquestionably correct conclusion\*, as in the following example.

All raccoons are omnivores.

This animal is a raccoon.

Therefore, this animal is an omnivore.

If the first statement is true (All raccoons are omnivores) and the second statement is true (This animal is a raccoon), then the conclusion (This animal is an omnivore) is unavoidable. If a group must have a certain quality, and an individual is a member of that group, then the individual must have that quality.

Unlike inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning allows for certainty as long as certain rules are followed.

\*In some contexts, the word conclusion is used to refer to the final paragraph of an essay. Here conclusion means the claim that is the outcome of deductive reasoning.

### **What is a premise?**

In a deductive argument, the premises are the statements whose logical relationship allows for the conclusion. The first premise is checked against the second premise in order to infer a conclusion.

Premise: All raccoons are omnivores.

Premise: This animal is a raccoon.

Conclusion: This animal is an omnivore.

### **Why should I evaluate the truth of a premise?**

A formal argument may be set up so that, on its face, it looks logical. However, no matter how well-constructed the argument is, the premises must be true or any inferences based on the premises will be unsound.

Inductive reasoning often stands behind the premises in a deductive argument. That is, a generalization reached through inductive reasoning is the claim in an inductive argument, but a speaker or writer can turn around and use that generalization as a premise in a deductive argument.

Premise (induced): Most Labrador retrievers are friendly.

Premise (deduced): Kimber is a Labrador retriever.

Conclusion: Therefore, Kimber is friendly.

In this case we cannot know for certain that Kimber is a friendly Labrador retriever. The structure of the argument may look logical, but it is based on observations and generalizations rather than indisputable facts.

### **How do I evaluate the truth of a premise?**

One way to test the accuracy of a premise is to determine whether the premise is based upon a sample that is both representative and sufficiently large, and ask yourself whether all relevant factors have been taken into account in the analysis of data that leads to a generalization. Another way to evaluate a premise is to determine whether its source is credible. Are the authors identified? What is their background? Was the premise something you found on an undocumented website? Did you find it in a popular publication or a scholarly one? How complete, how

recent, and how relevant were the studies or statistics discussed in the source?

How do I know if a source is credible?

Who is an expert?

How do I decide if someone is an expert?

How do I decide if someone's expertise is relevant?

How do you know if you should trust the expert?

The following argument is based upon research published in a peer-reviewed medical journal. The author has an extensive background in public health including a medical degree and doctorate in medicine. He is employed by the Public Health Agency in Barcelona, Spain.

Citation:

Plans-Rubío, P. (2012). The vaccination coverage required to establish herd immunity against influenza viruses. *Preventive Medicine* 55, 72-77.

Judging from what we know about credible sources, we can feel confident using the following the following argument in our own research even though it is based upon inductive premises.

Premise (induced): Against most influenza viruses, an 80-90 % vaccination rate for adults is required for herd immunity (Plans-Rubío, 2012, p. 76).

Premise (induced): In 2009-2010, the influenza vaccination rate for adults was 42 % (p. 76).

Claim: In 2009-2010, the influenza vaccination rate among adults was not sufficient for herd immunity.

The source is highly credible in part because it is written by an expert for experts. That fact may make a source a challenging read for ordinary readers. It is a medical study based on sufficient, representative, and relevant data that has been carefully analyzed by someone highly qualified in the field. Depending on the nature of an assignment and whether a course is for majors or non-majors, you may be allowed to use some sources that report on



studies rather than the original studies themselves. However, you should consult the primary sources whenever possible.

**How is a conclusion like a thesis statement?**

When we talk about a paper, we usually talk about the paper's main claim as being its thesis statement. But of course a paper that just makes a claim or states an opinion but offers no supporting reasons or arguments isn't much of a paper. We would be bothered by reading an editorial in which someone stated a strong opinion on some public issue yet did nothing to justify that opinion.

When an author supports a thesis with reasons, then the thesis statement can be described as the conclusion of an argument, with the supporting reasons being that argument's premises.



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# *Identifying Fallacious Reasoning*

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### **What are fallacies?**

Fallacies are errors or tricks of reasoning. We call a fallacy an error of reasoning if it occurs accidentally; we call it a trick of reasoning if a speaker or writer uses it in order to deceive or manipulate his audience. Fallacies can be either formal or informal.

Whether a fallacy is an error or a trick, whether it is formal or informal, its use undercuts the validity and soundness of any argument. At the same time, fallacious reasoning can damage the credibility of the speaker/writer and improperly manipulate the emotions of the audience/reader.

### **What is a formal fallacy?**

Most formal fallacies are errors of logic: the conclusion doesn't really "follow from" (is not supported by) the premises. Either the premises are untrue or the argument is invalid. Below is an example of an invalid deductive argument.

Premise: All black bears are omnivores.

Premise: All raccoons are omnivores.

Conclusion: All raccoons are black bears.

Bears are a subset of omnivores. Raccoons also are a subset of

omnivores. But these two subsets do not overlap, and that fact makes the conclusion illogical. The argument is invalid—that is, the relationship between the premises doesn't support the conclusion.

Why is it important to recognize formal fallacies?

"Raccoons are black bears" is instantaneously recognizable as fallacious and may seem too silly to be worth bothering about. However, that and other forms of poor logic play out on a daily basis, and they have real world consequences. Below is an example of a fallacious argument:

Premise: All Arabs are Muslims.

Premise: All Iranians are Muslims.

Conclusion: All Iranians are Arabs.

This argument fails on two levels. First, the premises are untrue because although many Arabs and Iranians are Muslim, not all are. Second, the two ethnic groups are sets that do not overlap; nevertheless, the two groups are confounded because they (largely) share one quality in common. One only has to look at comments on the web to realize that the confusion is widespread and that it influences attitudes and opinions about U.S. foreign policy.

### **What is an informal fallacy?**

Informal fallacies take many forms and are widespread in everyday discourse. Very often they involve bringing irrelevant information into an argument or they are based on assumptions that, when examined, prove to be incorrect. Formal fallacies are created when the relationship between premises and conclusion does not hold up or when premises are unsound; informal fallacies are more dependent on the misuse of language and of evidence.

It is easy to find fairly well-accepted lists of informal fallacies, but that does not mean that it is always easy to spot them. Some moves are always fallacious; others represent ways of thinking that are sometimes valid and reasonable but which can also be misused in ways that make them fallacies.

## **How can ethos, logos, and pathos be used to test an argument for fallacies?**

### **Appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos**

As a reader and a listener, it is fundamental that you be able to recognize how writers and speakers depend upon ethos, logos, and pathos in their efforts to communicate. As a communicator yourself, you will benefit from being able to see how others rely upon ethos, logos, and pathos so that you can apply what you learn from your observations to your own speaking and writing. We will explore appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos by answering the following questions.

#### 1. How do I evaluate an appeal to ethos?

When you evaluate an appeal to ethos, you examine how successfully a speaker or writer establishes authority or credibility with her intended audience. You are asking yourself what elements of the essay or speech would cause an audience to feel that the author is (or is not) trustworthy and credible.

A good speaker or writer leads the audience to feel comfortable with her knowledge of a topic. The audience sees her as someone worth listening to—a clear or insightful thinker, or at least someone who is well-informed and genuinely interested in the topic.

Some of the questions you can ask yourself as you evaluate an author's ethos may include the following:

Has the writer or speaker cited her sources or in some way made it possible for the audience to access further information on the issue?

Does she demonstrate familiarity with different opinions and perspectives?

Does she provide complete and accurate information about the issue?

Does she use the evidence fairly? Does she avoid selective use of evidence or other types of manipulation of data?

Does she speak respectfully about people who may have opinions and perspectives different from her own?

Does she use unbiased language?

Does she avoid excessive reliance on emotional appeals?

Does she accurately convey the positions of people with whom she disagrees?

Does she acknowledge that an issue may be complex or multifaceted?

Does her education or experience give her credibility as someone who should be listened to on this issue?

Some of the above questions may strike you as relevant to an evaluation of logos as well as ethos—questions about the completeness and accuracy of information and whether it is used fairly. In fact, illogical thinking and the misuse of evidence may lead an audience to draw conclusions not only about the person making the argument but also about the logic of an argument.

## 2. How do I recognize when an appeal to ethos is manipulative?

In a perfect world, everyone would tell the truth and we could depend upon the credibility of speakers and authors. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. You would expect that news reporters would be objective and tell new stories based upon the facts. Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair, and Brian Williams all lost their jobs for plagiarizing or fabricated part of their news stories. Janet Cooke's Pulitzer Prize was revoked after it was discovered that she made up "Jimmy," an eight-year old heroin addict (Prince, 2010). Brian Williams was fired as anchor of the NBC Nightly News for exaggerating his role in the Iraq War.

Others have become infamous for claiming academic degrees that they didn't earn as in the case of Marilee Jones. At the time of discovery, she was Dean of Admissions at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). After 28 years of employment, it was

determined that she never graduated from college (Lewin, 2007). However, on her website (<http://www.marileejoness.com>) she is still promoting herself as “a sought after speaker, consultant and author” (para. 1) and “one of the nation’s most experienced College Admissions Deans” (para. 2).

Beyond lying about their own credentials, authors may employ a number of tricks or fallacies to lure you to their point of view. Some of the more common techniques are described below. See the CORE 201 Appendix for an answer to “What are additional examples of fallacies of ethos?”. When you recognize these fallacies being committed you should question the credibility of the speaker and the legitimacy of the argument. If you use these when making your own arguments, be aware that they may undermine or destroy your credibility.

### 3. What fallacies misuse appeals to ethos?

**Ad hominem:** attacking the person making an argument rather than the argument itself.

Example: “Of course that doctor advocates vaccination—he probably owns stock in a pharmaceutical company.”

**False authority:** relying on claims of expertise when the claimed expert (a) lacks adequate background/credentials in the relevant field, (b) departs in major ways from the consensus in the field, or (c) is biased, e.g., has a financial stake in the outcome.

Example: “Dr. X is an engineer, and he doesn’t believe in global warming.”

**Guilt by association:** linking the person making an argument to an unpopular person or group.

Example: “My opponent is a card-carrying member of the ACLU.”

**Poisoning the well:** undermining an opponent’s credibility before he or she gets a chance to speak.

Example: “The prosecution is going to bring up a series of so-called experts who are getting a lot of money to testify here today.”

**Transfer fallacy:** associating the argument with someone or something popular or respected; hoping that the positive associations will “rub off” onto the argument.

Examples: In politics, decorating a stage with red, white, and blue flags and bunting; in advertising, using pleasant or wholesome settings as the backdrop for print or video ads.

**Name-calling:** labeling an opponent with words that have negative connotations in an effort to undermine the opponent's credibility.

Example: “These rabble-rousers are nothing but feminazis.”

**Plain folk:** presenting yourself as (or associating your position with) ordinary people with whom you hope your audience will identify; arguers imply that they or their supporters are trustworthy because they are ‘common people’ rather than members of the elite.

Example: “Who would you vote for—someone raised in a working-class neighborhood who has the support of Joe the Plumber or some elitist whose daddy sent him to a fancy school?”

**Testimonial fallacy:** inserting an endorsement of the argument by someone who is popular or respected but who lacks expertise or authority in the area under discussion.

Example: “I’m not a lawyer, but I play one on TV”—consider how a celebrity may endorse a legal service on television, but in reality they have to legal training or expertise. \*

#### 4. How do I evaluate an appeal to logos?

When you evaluate an appeal to logos, you consider how logical the argument is and how well-supported it is in terms of evidence. You are asking yourself what elements of the essay or speech would cause an audience to believe that the argument is (or is not) logical and supported by appropriate evidence.

5. How do I recognize when an appeal to logos is manipulative?

Diagramming the argument can help you determine if an appeal to logos is manipulative. Are the premises true? Does the conclusion follow logically from the premises? Is there sufficient, typical, accurate, and relevant evidence to support inductive reasoning? Is the speaker or author attempting to divert your attention from the real issues? These are some of the elements you might consider while evaluating an argument for the use of logos.

Pay particular attention to numbers, statistics, findings, and quotes used to support an argument. Be critical of the source and do your own investigation of the “facts”. Maybe you’ve heard or read that half of all marriages in America will end in divorce. It is so often discussed that we assume it must be true. Careful research will show that the original marriage study was flawed, and divorce rates in America have steadily declined since 1985 (Peck, 1993). If there is no scientific evidence, why do we continue to believe it? Part of the reason might be that it supports our idea of the dissolution of the American family.

Fallacies that misuse appeals to logos or attempt to manipulate the logic of an argument are discussed below. You can find additional examples in the appendix: What are additional examples of fallacies of logos?

6. What fallacies misuse appeals to logos?

**Hasty generalization:** jumping to conclusions based upon an unrepresentative sample or insufficient evidence.

Example: “10 of the last 14 National Spelling Bee Champions have been Indian American. Indian Americans must all be great spellers!”

**Appeal to ignorance—true believer’s form:** arguing along the lines that if an opponent can’t prove something isn’t the case, then



it is reasonable to believe that it is the case; transfers the burden of proof away from the person making the claim (the proponent).

Example: "You can't prove that extraterrestrials haven't visited earth, so it is reasonable to believe that they have visited earth."

**Appeal to ignorance—skeptic's form:** confusing absence of evidence with evidence of absence; assumes that if you cannot now prove something exists, then it is shown that it doesn't exist.

Example: "There's no proof that starting classes later in the day will improve the performance of our high school students; therefore, this change in schedule will not work."

**Begging the question:** circular argument because the premise is the same as the claim that you are trying to prove.

Example: "This legislation is sinful because it is the wrong thing to do."

**False dilemma:** misuse of the either/or argument; presenting only two options when other choices exist

Example: "Either we pass this ordinance or there will be rioting in the streets."

**Post hoc ergo propter hoc:** Latin phrase meaning "after this, therefore because of this"; confuses correlation with causation by concluding that an event preceding a second event must be the cause of that second event.

Example: "My child was diagnosed with autism after receiving vaccinations. That is proof that vaccines are to blame."

**Non-sequitur:** Latin for "does not follow"; the conclusion cannot be inferred from the premises because there is a break in the logical connection between a claim and the premises that are meant to support it, either because a premise is untrue (or missing) or because the relationship between premises does not support the deduction stated in the claim.

Example (untrue premise): "If she is a college student, she is a member of a sorority. She is a college student. Therefore she is a member of a sorority."

**Smoke screen:** avoiding the real issue or a tough question by introducing an unrelated topic as a distraction; sometimes called a red herring.

Example: “My opponent says I am weak on crime, but I have been one of the most reliable participants in city council meetings.”

**Straw man:** pretending to criticize an opponent’s position but actually misrepresenting his or her view as simpler and/or more extreme than it is and therefore easier to refute than the original or actual position; unfairly undermines credibility of claim if not source of claim.

Example: “Senator Smith says we should cut back the Defense budget. His position is that we should let down our defenses and just trust our enemies not to attack us!”

## 7. How do I evaluate an appeal to pathos?

People may be uninterested in an issue unless they can find a personal connection to it, so a communicator may try to connect to her audience by evoking emotions or by suggesting that author and audience share attitudes, beliefs, and values—in other words, by making an appeal to pathos. Even in formal writing, such as academic books or journals, an author often will try to present an issue in such a way as to connect to the feelings or attitudes of his audience.

When you evaluate pathos, you are asking whether a speech or essay arouses the audience’s interest and sympathy. You are looking for the elements of the essay or speech that might cause the audience to feel (or not feel) an emotional connection to the content.

An author may use an audience’s attitudes, beliefs, or values as a kind of foundation for his argument—a layer that the writer knows is already in place at the outset of the argument. So one of the questions you can ask yourself as you evaluate an author’s use of pathos is whether there are points at which the writer or

speaker makes statements assuming that the audience shares his feelings or attitudes. For example, in an argument about the First Amendment, does the author write as if he takes it for granted that his audience is religious?

8. How do I recognize when an appeal to pathos is manipulative?

Up to a certain point, an appeal to pathos can be a legitimate part of an argument. For example, a writer or speaker may begin with an anecdote showing the effect of a law on an individual. This anecdote will be a means of gaining an audience's attention for an argument in which she uses evidence and reason to present her full case as to why the law should/should not be repealed or amended. In such a context, engaging the emotions, values, or beliefs of the audience is a legitimate tool whose effective use should lead you to give the author high marks.

An appropriate appeal to pathos is different than trying to unfairly play upon the audience's feelings and emotions through fallacious, misleading, or excessively emotional appeals. Such a manipulative use of pathos may alienate the audience or cause them to "tune out". An example would be the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) commercials featuring the song "In the Arms on an Angel" and footage of abused animals. Even Sarah McLachlan, the singer and spokesperson featured in the commercials admits that she changes the channel because they are too depressing (Brekke, 2014).

Even if an appeal to pathos is not manipulative, such an appeal should complement rather than replace reason and evidence-based argument. In addition to making use of pathos, the author must establish her credibility (ethos) and must supply reasons and evidence (logos) in support of her position. An author who essentially replaces logos and ethos with pathos alone should be given low marks.

## 9. What fallacies misuse appeals to pathos?

**Appeal to fear:** using scare tactics; emphasizing threats or exaggerating possible dangers.

Example: "Without this additional insurance, you could find yourself broke and homeless."

**Appeal to guilt and appeal to pity:** trying to evoke an emotional reaction that will cause the audience to behave sympathetically even if it means disregarding the issue at hand.

Example: "I know I missed assignments, but if you fail me, I will lose my financial aid and have to drop out."

**Appeal to popularity (bandwagon):** urging audience to follow a course of action because "everyone does it."

Example: "Nine out of ten shoppers have switched to Blindingly-Bright-Smile Toothpaste."

**Slippery Slope:** making an unsupported or inadequately supported claim that "One thing inevitably leads to another." This may be considered a fallacy of logos as well as pathos but is placed in this section because it often is used to evoke the emotion of fear.

Example: "We can't legalize marijuana; if we do, then the next thing you know people will be strung out on heroin."

**Appeal to the people:** also called stirring symbols fallacy; the communicator distracts the readers or listeners with symbols that are very meaningful to them, with strong associations or connotations.

Example: This fallacy is referred to in the sentence "That politician always wraps himself in the flag."

**Appeal to tradition:** people have done it a certain way for a long time; assumes that what has been customary in past is correct and proper.

Example: "A boy always serves as student-body president; a girl always serves as secretary."

**Loaded-Language and other emotionally charged uses of**

**language:** using slanted or biased language, including God terms, devil terms, euphemisms, and dysphemisms.

#### 10. Under what contexts are fallacies committed?

Fallacies can crop up whenever definitions, inferences, and facts are at issue. Once we become familiar with fallacies we may start to see them everywhere. That can be good and bad. Since persuasion is ever-present, it is good to be on guard against various hidden persuaders. But whether a persuasive strategy is considered fallacious may be dependent on context. Editorials and advertisements—both political and commercial—frequently use such strategies as transfer and appeals to popularity. We need to be critically aware of the techniques of persuasion being used on us, but since we expect advertisements, political speeches, and editorials on public policy or ethical issues to try to sway us emotionally, perhaps only extreme examples deserve to be judged harshly for being fallacious.

In addition, something that looks as if it is a fallacy may turn out not to be on closer examination. For example, not everything that smacks of slippery slope is fallacious. There are indeed some genuine slippery slopes, where an initial decision or action may have both great and inevitable repercussions. So whether that fallacy has been committed depends upon what the author has done (or failed to do) to support his claim. Similarly, while personal attacks (*ad hominem*) in most cases are unfair and considered fallacious, there are special situations in which a person's character may be directly relevant to his or her qualifications. For example, when somebody is running for political office or for a judgeship, casting doubt on his or her character may be appropriate—if one has facts to back it up—since it relates to job expectations. But wholesale character assassination remains a rhetorical ploy of the propagandist or demagogue.

One way to go about evaluating an argument for fallacies is to

return to the concept of the three fundamental appeals: ethos, logos, and pathos.

Fallacies of ethos relate to credibility. These fallacies may unfairly build up the credibility of the author (or his allies) or unfairly attack the credibility of the author's opponent (or her allies). Some fallacies give an unfair advantage to the claims of the speaker or writer or an unfair disadvantage to the opponent's claims. These are fallacies of logos. Fallacies of pathos rely excessively upon emotional appeals, attaching positive associations to the author's argument and negative ones to the opponent's position.

### **How do fallacies weaken arguments?**

Both formal and informal fallacies are errors of reasoning, and if a speaker or writer relies on such fallacies, even unintentionally, she undercuts her argument. For example, if someone defines a key term in her argument in an ambiguous, vague, or circular way, her argument will appear very weak to an astute audience.

In addition, when listeners or readers spot questionable reasoning or unfair attempts at audience manipulation, more than their evaluation of the author's argument (logos) may be compromised. Their evaluation of the credibility of the speaker (ethos), and perhaps their ability to connect with that speaker on the level of shared values (pathos), also may be compromised. At the very least, the presence of fallacies will suggest to an audience that the speaker or writer lacks argumentative skill.

*\*The subject matter in the example have been changed from the original subject matter found in the original source.*

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# *Distinguishing Between Moral & Nonmoral Claims*

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Recall an ethical dilemma is a term for a situation in which a person faces an ethically problematic situation and is not sure of what she ought to do. Those who experience ethical dilemmas feel themselves being pulled by competing ethical demands or values and perhaps feel that they will be blameworthy or experience guilt no matter what course of action they take.

### **What is the role of values in ethical dilemmas?**

Frequently, ethical dilemmas are fundamentally a clash of values. We may experience a sense of frustration trying to figure out what the 'right' thing to do is because any available course of action violates some value that we are dedicated to. For example, let's say you are taking a class with a good friend and sitting next to him one day during a quiz you discover him copying answers from a third student. Now you are forced into an ethical decision embodied by two important values common to your society. Those values are honesty and loyalty. Do you act dishonestly and preserve your



friend's secret or do you act disloyal and turn them in for academic fraud?

Awareness of the underlying values at play in an ethical conflict can act as a powerful method to clarify the issues involved. We should also be aware of the use of value as a verb in the ethical sense. Certainly what we choose to value more or less will play a very significant role in the process of differentiating between outcomes and actions thereby determining what exactly we should do.

Literature and film are full of ethical dilemmas, as they allow us to reflect on the human struggle as well as presenting tests of individual character. For example in *World War Z*, Gerry Lane (played by Brad Pitt in the movie version) has to make a similar choice as Sartre's Frenchman: between serving the world-community of humans in their just war against Zombies, and serving his own immediate family. It adds depth and substance to the character to see him struggling with this choice over the right thing to do.

### **What ethical dilemmas are more common in real life?**

If you've ever felt yourself pulled between two moral choices, you've faced an ethical dilemma. Often we make our choice based on which value we prize more highly. Some examples:

You are offered a scholarship to attend a far-away college, but that would mean leaving your family, to whom you are very close. Values: success/future achievements/excitement vs. family/love/safety

You are friends with Jane, who is dating Bill. Jane confides in you that she'd been seeing Joe on the side but begs you not to tell Bill. Bill then asks you if Jane has ever cheated on him. Values: Friendship/loyalty vs. Truth

You are the official supervisor for Tywin. You find out that Tywin has been leaving work early and asking his co-workers to clock him out on time. You intend to fire Tywin, but then you find out that

he's been leaving early because he needs to pick up his child from daycare. Values: Justice vs. Mercy

You could probably make a compelling argument for either side for each of the above. That's what makes ethical dilemmas so difficult (or interesting, if you're not directly involved!)

### **What is an ethical violation?**

Sometimes we are confronted with situations in which we are torn between a right and a wrong; we know what the right thing to do would be, but the wrong is personally beneficial, tempting, or much easier to do. In 2010, Ohio State University football coach Jim Tressel discovered that some of his players were violating NCAA rules. He did not report it to anyone, as it would lead to suspensions, hurting the football team's chances of winning. He was not torn between two moral choices; he knew what he should do, but didn't want to jeopardize his career. In 2011, Tressel's unethical behavior became public, OSU had to void its wins for the year, and he resigned as coach.

Ethics experts tend to think that ethical considerations should always trump personal or self-interested ones and that to resist following one's personal desires is a matter of having the right motivation and the strength of will to repel temptation. One way to strengthen your "ethics muscles" is to become familiar with the ways we try to excuse or dismiss unethical actions.

### **How does self-interest affect people's ethical choices?**

In a perfect world, morality and happiness would always align: living ethically and living well wouldn't collide because living virtuously—being honest, trustworthy, caring, etc.—would provide the deepest human happiness and would best allow humans to flourish. Some would say, however, that we do not live in a perfect world, and that our society entices us to think of happiness in terms of status and material possessions at the cost of principles. Some even claim that all persons act exclusively out of self-interest—that is, out of psychological egoism—and that genuine concern for the well-being of others—altruism—is impossible. As you explore an

ethical issue, consider whether people making choices within the context of the issue are acting altruistically or out of self-interest.

**What is the difference between good ethical reasoning and mere rationalization?**

When pressed to justify their choices, people may try to evade responsibility and to justify decisions that may be unethical but that serve their self-interest. People are amazingly good at passing the buck in this fashion, yet pretty poor at recognizing and admitting that they are doing so. When a person is said to be rationalizing his actions and choices, this doesn't mean he is applying critical thinking, or what we have described as ethical analysis. Quite the opposite: it means that he is trying to convince others—or often just himself—using reasons that he should be able to recognize as faulty or poor reasons. Perhaps the most common rationalization of unethical action has come to be called the Nuremberg Defense: 'I was just doing what I was told to do—following orders or the example of my superior. So blame them and exonerate me.' This defense was used by Nazi officials during the Nuremberg trials after World War II in order to rationalize behavior such as participation in the administration of concentration camps. This rationalization didn't work then, and it doesn't work now.

**What kinds of rationalizations do people make for their actions?\***

Rationalization is a common human coping strategy. An intriguing finding in research on corruption is that people who behave unethically usually do not see themselves as unethical. Instead, they recast their actions using rationalization techniques to justify what they've done. Common rationalization strategies:

**Denial of responsibility**

The people engaged in bad behavior "had no choice" but to participate in such activities OR people turn a blind eye to ethical misbehavior.

Examples:

"What can I do? My boss ordered me not to tell the police."

"My neighbors' children always seem to have bruises, but it's none of my business."

### **Denial of injury**

No one is harmed by the action, or that the harm could have been worse.

Examples:

"All's well that ends well."

"Nobody died."

### **Blaming the victim**

Counter any blame for the actions by arguing that the violated party deserved what happened.

Examples:

"She chose to go that fraternity party; what did she think was going to happen?"

"If the professors don't want students to say mean things in student evaluations, they should be more entertaining."

### **Social weighting**

Compared to what other people have done, this is nothing, OR everybody does it, so it's okay.

Examples:

"I sometimes come into work late, but compared to everybody who leaves early every Friday, it's nothing to get worked up over."

"Everyone around me was texting; it's not fair that I should be the one in trouble."

### **Appeal to higher values**

It was done for a good, higher cause.

Examples:

"You should let me copy your homework; if I fail this class, I'll lose my scholarship."

"I couldn't tell anyone because I'm loyal to my boss."

### **Saint's excuse**

If someone has done good things in the past, they should get a "pass" for misbehavior.

Examples:

"He's done so many good things for the community, it would be a shame to punish him."

"She's so talented, why focus on the bad things she's done?"

**What fallacies are most prevalent in debates over ethical issues?**

In addition to self-deception and rationalizations, we often find overtly fallacious reasoning that undermines open, constructive debate of ethical issues. Of the common we described, those most common in ethics debate include ad hominem (personal) attacks, appeals to false authority, appeals to fear, the slippery slope fallacy, false dilemmas, the two-wrongs-make-a-right fallacy, and the strawman fallacy. Fallacious reasoning, especially the attempt to sway sentiment through language manipulation, is ever-present in popular sources of information and opinion pieces, like blogs and special-interest-group sites. It may take practice to spot fallacious reasoning, but being able to give names to these strategies of trickery and manipulation provides the aspiring critical thinker with a solid start.

\* Modified from Anand, V., Ashforth, B. E., & Joshi, M. (2004). Business as usual: The acceptance and perpetuation of corruptions in organizations. *Academy of Management Executive*, 18(2). Retrieved from [http://actoolkit.unprme.org/wp-content/resourcepdf/anand\\_et\\_al.\\_ame\\_2004.pdf](http://actoolkit.unprme.org/wp-content/resourcepdf/anand_et_al._ame_2004.pdf)

**How can I tell what is the "right" thing to do?**

That's the million dollar question. Ethical theories describe the rules or principles that guide people when the rightness or wrongness of an action becomes an issue. In this section, you will read about some of the most common and important ways of approaching ethics. They all ask the question, "how can I tell what the right thing to do is?" but differ as to where to start and what to consider:

1. Situation. Relativists say that rightness changes

depending on the individuals and culture involved.

2. Results. Consequentialists believe that you should judge rightness based on the predicted outcome. Utilitarianism is a type of consequentialist perspective.
3. Actions. Deontologists judge the rightness purely on the action itself. Duty-based and rights-based perspectives fall into this category.
4. Actors. In actor-oriented perspectives, the person or entity making the decision- the ethical actor- must decide what a virtuous person or entity would do, and follow that path. The ethical actor may also be called the agent.

### **How do I use ethical reasoning to make decisions?**

Making good ethical decisions takes practice. Our instinct or “gut” can draw us to selfish choices, so we need to step back and think critically about ethical dilemmas rather than just jumping to our first solution.

We need to consider all the elements involved:

- Who is affected?
- Who is making the decision?
- What are the known facts and circumstances?
- How ethical are the possible actions?

The framework below can help guide you through this process. It is not a checklist of steps; rather, decision making is an iterative process in which learning a new fact may cause you to revise earlier thoughts on the situation.

### **How do I recognize an ethical situation?**

Identifying an ethical situation will require you to research the facts of a situation and to ask whether stakeholders must consider questions about the moral rightness or wrongness of public policy

or personal behavior. To help you identify and describe the nature of the ethical issue, ask the following:

Does the situation require individuals to engage in ethical judgments? Do you find yourself thinking about whether an action is morally right or wrong or whether a person's motives are morally good or bad? Could you debate what, morally, someone 'should' or 'ought to' do in the situation?

Does the situation seem to pose an ethical conflict for one or more stakeholder? That is, does there seem to be a clash between what a stakeholder 'ought to do' and what she 'wants to do'?

Does the situation pose an ethical dilemma for one or more stakeholders? That is, does it seem as if someone is pulled between competing ethical demands, each calling for behavior that would be ethical but with one action making it impossible to perform the other, equally justifiable action? Are there values that are in conflict?

You also should consider whether any professional codes are relevant to the situation. Often professional codes spell out the ethical or moral obligations of members of a profession. Compare any relevant professional code with the behavior of participants in that situation who may be bound by that code. Was their behavior consistent with that code? Were there any competing norms or codes of behavior that put participants in the midst of an ethical dilemma?

In an ethical situation, a difficult decision- perhaps multiple difficult decisions, will need to be made.

### **How do I identify stakeholders?**

Usually, any complex topic features multiple stakeholders: people who have an interest in or are affected by the outcome of decisions revolving around the situation. These different parties are not all affected in the same way, and therefore, their perspectives on the topic will differ.

### **How do I identify the different perspectives and positions held by stakeholders?**

A stakeholder's perspective or position is based upon the stakeholder's relationship to the situation. That relationship can be captured by asking questions about power, support, influence, and need in the context of the situation that the stakeholder has an interest in.

- Power—How much decision-making authority does the stakeholder have over the situation?
- Support—How strongly is the stakeholder for or against the idea?
- Influence—How much ability does the stakeholder have to affect the decisions made by other people?
- Need—For the stakeholder to benefit, what does she need to have happen (or not happen) in the situation?

Be sure to look for interests and perspectives that may be shared by different stakeholders, and be certain that you do not automatically side with the stakeholders who have the most power and influence. If you gravitate toward the parties with the most power and influence, you may end up ignoring the individuals or groups with the most need, the ones who may be badly hurt by an unethical decision.

### **How can I research stakeholder positions?**

When you research an issue, look beyond yes/no, pro/con arguments in order to see the people involved in the situation. Remember that often there are more than the oversimplified 'two sides', so be open to identifying more than two stakeholders.

Make a list of the individuals and groups who affect or are affected by the issue. Add to the list as your research uncovers additional aspects of the situation that bring in additional stakeholders.

Analyze the positions held by each stakeholder, looking in-depth at their involvement. Go to the Appendix for a list of possible questions to research.



**How do I identify the ethical actor?**

Within that set of stakeholders, identify which is the one (or ones) in a position to take action. It could be an individual, a group, or an institution. Those are the ethical actors, who will exercise the decision related to the ethical situation.

The ethical actor may be you, but it's also probable in this class that you will research case studies of ethical situations in the wider world. In such assignments, focus your attention on the people and entities that can and need to take action in order for this situation to be resolved. Avoid 'victim blaming'- looking at stakeholders and condemning them for getting themselves into the current situation, or trying to rewrite history so that the situation wouldn't exist. Concentrate on the facts of the case as they relate to the decision making process.

**How can I use critical thinking in this process?**

How can a person decide whether a certain act is ethical without being influenced by his biases? The thoughtful development of criteria is one method to keep biases from having an excessive influence on the group's decision-making process. Criteria are carefully considered, objective principles that can be applied to a situation in order to reach measured conclusions.

**What are criteria?**

Criteria are the standards you apply to develop and evaluation whether a solution to a problem is 'good' or 'right'. People apply criteria to solve both ethical and non-ethical problems.

Criteria need to be specific and measurable in some fashion to allow them to be used to judge whether a solution is likely to successfully address a problem. See the Appendix for more information on criteria.

**How do I identify possible actions?**

When you have identified who can act and what criteria is essential, you can now brainstorm options for actions. You can use the major ethical perspectives to help you:

- What action would result in the best results?
- What action would respect stakeholders' rights?
- What action would respect the ethical actor's obligations?
- What action would lead the ethical actor to being a virtuous person or organization?
- What action gives extra consideration to those who are vulnerable?

If this is a professional situation, you should also check to see if there are any codes of conduct to consult.

If you think of other actions, apply the different ethical perspectives to them to see if they are ethical.

### **How do I evaluate the possible options?**

Sometimes all the theories point to the same action, but usually there are differences. At this point, you need to consider the specific situation and the context of the ethical actor. Which perspective is most appropriate given these circumstances?

For example, there is a limited amount of medication available for a very infectious disease. How do you decide who receives the medication?

- If the ethical actor is a government official deciding on a policy, one would probably turn to *utilitarianism*: what would be the best result for the most number of people?
- If the ethical actor is a physician, she may turn to *deontology*: what are her professional obligations?
- If the ethical actor is the mother of a sick child, she may give up her dose to save the baby ( *virtue ethics*, would ask what a virtuous person would do")\*

*Deontology is a universal ethical theory that considers whether an action itself is right or wrong. Deontologists argue that you can never*

*know what the results will be so it doesn't make sense to decide whether something is ethical based on outcomes.*

*Utilitarianism is a specific type of consequentialism that focuses on the greatest good for the greatest number. After you identify your options for action, you ask who will benefit and who will be harmed by each. The ethical action would be the one that caused the greatest good for the most people, or the least harm to the least number.*

*Thinkers who embrace virtue ethics emphasize that the sort of person we choose to be constitutes the heart of our ethical being. If you want to behave virtuously, become a virtuous person. Certain traits—for instance, honesty, compassion, generosity, courage—seem to be universally admired. These strengths of character are virtues. To acquire these virtues, follow the example of persons who possess them. Once acquired, these virtues may be trusted to guide our decisions about how to act, even in difficult situations.*

### **What else should I consider before acting?**

You should do a critical thinking check to make sure you are not falling into any fallacious thinking or rationalizations to justify an option that is selfish or otherwise unethical. Would you be okay with your decision being widely known and associated with you?

### **Am I done after acting?**

No. It's essential to examine how the decision turned out and consider what lessons you may have learned from it.

\*A slight modification from the original text includes addition of thought-provoking question related to virtue ethics.



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## CHAPTER 22

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# *"Moral Reasoning" Learning Unit - Self-Check*

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA



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## **PART V**

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# **NORMATIVE ETHICS**





## CHAPTER 23

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# *Normative Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes*

### **Normative Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

By the end of this learning unit, student will be able to:

- Explain the need for theories of moral value.
- Examine and compare major historical normative theories, such as virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, and utilitarianism.
- Analyze and assess arguments for and against competing normative theories and theories' strengths and weaknesses.



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Dara Ó Briain (comedian)

## 1. UTILITARIANISM: AN INTRODUCTION

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Some things appear to be straightforwardly good for people. Winning the lottery, marrying your true love or securing a desired set of qualifications all seem to be examples of events that improve a person's life. As a normative ethical theory, Utilitarianism suggests that we can decide what is morally right or morally wrong by weighing up which of our future possible actions promotes such goodness in our lives and the lives of people more generally.

## 2. HEDONISM

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Hedonism is a theory of well-being — a theory of how well a life is going for the person living that life. What separates Hedonism from other theories of well-being is that the hedonist believes that what defines a successful life is directly related to the amount of pleasure in that life; no other factors are relevant at all. Therefore, the more pleasure that a person experiences in their life then the better their life goes, and vice versa. Whereas other theories might focus on fulfilling desires people have, or an objective list of things such as friendship and health.

The roots of Hedonism can be traced back at least as far as Epicurus (341–270 BC) and Ancient Greece. Epicurus held the hedonistic view that the primary intrinsic good for a person is pleasure; meaning that pleasure is always good for a person in and of itself, irrespective of the cause or context of the pleasure. According to this theory pleasure is always intrinsically good for a person and less pleasure is always intrinsically bad.

Hedonism is a relatively simple theory of what makes your life better. If you feel that your life would be better if you won the lottery, married your true love or achieved your desired qualifications, then the hedonistic explanation of these judgments

is that these things are good for you only if they provide you with pleasure. Many pleasures may be physical, but Fred Feldman (1941–) is a defender of a theory known as Attitudinal Hedonism. According to this theory, psychological pleasures can themselves count as intrinsically good for a person. So, while reading a book would not seem to produce pleasure in a physical way, a hedonist may value the psychological pleasure associated with that act of reading and thus accept that it can improve a person's well-being. This understanding of hedonistic pleasure may help to explain why, for example, one person can gain so much pleasure from a Lady Gaga album while another gains nothing at all; the psychological responses to the music differ.

### 3. NOZICK'S EXPERIENCE MACHINE

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One important problem for Hedonism is that our well-being seems to be affected by more than just the total pleasure in our lives. It may be the case that you enjoy gaining a new qualification, but there seems to be more to the value of this event than merely the pleasure produced. Many people agree that success in gaining a meaningful qualification improves your life even if no pleasure is obtained from it. Certainly, many believe that the relationship between what improves your life and what gives pleasure is not directly proportional, as the hedonist would claim.

Robert Nozick (1938–2002) attacked the hedonistic idea that pleasure is the only good by testing our intuitions via a now famous thought-experiment. Nozick asks:

Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, pre-programming your life experiences? [...] Of course, while in

the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening [...] would you plug in?<sup>1</sup>

Nozick's challenge to Hedonism is based on the thought that most people who consider this possible situation would opt not to plug in. Indeed, if you ask yourself if you would actually choose to leave behind your real friends, family and life in favor of a pre-programmed existence you also might conclude that plugging into the experience machine would not be desirable. However, if Hedonism is correct and our well-being is determined entirely by the amount of pleasure that we experience, then Nozick wonders "what else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?"<sup>2</sup> The experience machine guarantees us pleasure yet we find it unappealing compared to a real life where pleasure is far from assured. This may suggest that our well-being is determined by other factors in addition to how much pleasure we secure, perhaps knowledge or friendships.

The hedonists need not give way entirely on this point, of course, as they may feel that the experience machine is desirable just because it guarantees experiences of pleasure. Or, you might believe that our suspicions about the machine are misplaced. After all, once inside the machine we would not suspect that things were not real. You may feel that the hedonist could bite-the-bullet (accept the apparently awkward conclusion as a non-fatal implication of the theory) and say that any reticence to enter the machine is irrational. Perhaps the lives of those choosing to be plugged in to the machine would go extraordinary well!

#### 4. THE FOUNDATIONS OF BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM

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Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was the first of the "classical utilitarians". Driven by a genuine desire for social reform, Bentham wanted to be as much involved in law, politics and economics as abstract philosophizing.

Bentham developed his moral theory of Utilitarianism on the

foundation of the type of hedonistic thinking described in section two. For Bentham, the only thing that determines the value of a life, or indeed the value of an event or action, is the amount of pleasure contained in that life, or the amount of pleasure produced as a result of that event or action. Bentham is a hedonistic utilitarian. This belief in Hedonism, however, was not something that Bentham took to be unjustified or arbitrary; for him Hedonism could be empirically justified by evidence in the world in its favor. According to Bentham:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.<sup>3</sup>

Bentham moves from this empirical claim about the factors that guide our behavior to a normative claim about how we ought to live. He creates a moral theory based on the bringing about of more pleasure and less pain.

When first understanding Utilitarianism, it is also crucial to understand what is meant by the term “utility”. Bentham defined it as “[...] that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness [...] or [...] to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness”.<sup>4</sup> Utility is thus promoted when pleasure is promoted and when unhappiness is avoided. Bentham’s commitment to Hedonism means for him that goodness is just an increase in pleasure, and evil or unhappiness is just an increase in pain or decrease in pleasure. With this understanding of utility in mind, Bentham commits himself to the Principle of Utility:

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.<sup>5</sup>

In effect, this principle simply says that promoting utility, defined

in terms of pleasure, is to be approved of and reducing utility is to be disapproved of.

The Principle of Utility, backed by a commitment to Hedonism, underpins the central utilitarian claim made by Bentham. Based on a phrase that he wrongly attributed to Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), Bentham suggests that the measure of right and wrong is the extent to which an action produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Of course, what counts as good, for Bentham, is pleasure. We can then rephrase what Bentham himself call his fundamental axiom as a requirement to promote the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, in order to act morally.

## 5. THE STRUCTURE OF BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM

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In addition to being hedonistic, Bentham's Utilitarianism is also:

1. Consequentialist/Teleological
2. Relativist
3. Maximizing
4. Impartial

Bentham's Utilitarianism is consequentialist because the moral value of an action or event is determined entirely by the consequences of that event. The theory is also described as teleological for the same reason, based on the Greek word *telos* that means "end" or "purpose". If more pleasure follows as a consequence of "Action A" rather than "Action B", then according to the fundamental axiom of Utilitarianism "Action A" should be undertaken and is morally right; choosing "Action B" would be morally wrong.

In addition, Bentham's Utilitarianism is Relativistic rather than Absolutist. Absolutist moral views hold that certain actions will

always be morally wrong irrespective of context or consequences. For example, many campaigning groups suggest that torture is always morally unacceptable whether it is carried out by vindictive dictators seeking to instill fear in a population or whether it is authorized by democratically elected governments seeking to obtain information in order to stop a terrorist attack. For absolutists then, the act of torture is absolutely wrong in all cases and situations.

Clearly, Bentham cannot hold this type of view because sometimes the pain involved in torture may lead to the promotion of greater pleasure (or less intense pain) overall, such as in the case where torture stops a terrorist atrocity. On this basis, the Benthamite utilitarian must believe that whether a certain action is right or wrong is always relative to the situation in which the action takes place.

Bentham's Utilitarianism is maximizing because it does not merely require that pleasure is promoted, but that the greatest pleasure for the greatest number is secured. This means that some actions that lead to pleasure will still not be morally good acts if another action that could have produced even more pleasure in that setting was rejected. Thus, for example, if you gain some pleasure from spending money on a new book, but that money could have produced more pleasure had it been donated to a local charity for the homeless, then buying a new book would be morally wrong even though it led to some pleasure because it did not maximize the total amount of pleasure that was possible in that circumstance.

Finally, Bentham's Utilitarianism is also impartial in the sense that what matters is simply securing the maximum amount of pleasure for the maximum number of people; the theory does not give special preference regarding which people are supposed to have access to, or share in, that total pleasure. Bentham's utilitarian theory is associated with the idea of equal consideration of interests; as long as total pleasure is maximized then it does not



matter if that pleasure is experienced by royalty, presidents, siblings, children, friends or enemies. In the total calculation of pleasure, we are all equal regardless of our status, behavior or any other social factor.

## 6. HEDONIC CALCULUS

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Hopefully it is now clear that for Bentham the consequences in terms of pleasure production of any action are what determine the morality of that action, and that no other factors are relevant. However, it is not clear how exactly we should go about working out what to do in specific cases. For example:

You are a military airman flying a fighter jet that is about to intercept a passenger airliner that seems to have been hijacked by an as yet unknown figure. The plane appears to be on a path that could take it either to an airport or, potentially, directly to a major and highly populated city. You are tasked with deciding how to act and must, therefore, choose whether or not to fire a missile at the plane. Firing at the plane would kill the passengers but save all lives on the ground, yet not firing may save the passengers, or it may give the passengers only a few more minutes before the plane is flown into a city full of innocents and they are killed in any case. Suggesting that the pilot weigh up the options and choose the action that secures the greatest pleasure for the greatest number is not obviously helpful in making such a difficult decision with so many variables.

Bentham recognized that such Problems of Calculation relating to the pleasure associated with future actions needed addressing in order for Utilitarianism to be a workable moral theory. Bentham therefore created the Hedonic Calculus (sometimes known as the Felicific Calculus) in order to help an individual work out how much pleasure would be created by differing possible actions. The Hedonic Calculus, as suggested by Bentham, is based on assessing possible pleasures according to their:

1. Intensity
2. Duration
3. Certainty
4. Remoteness (i.e. how far into the future the pleasure is)
5. Fecundity (i.e. how likely it is that pleasure will generate other related pleasures)
6. Purity (i.e. if any pain will be felt alongside that pleasure)
7. Extent (i.e. how many people might be able to share in that pleasure)<sup>6</sup>

The Hedonic Calculus is therefore supposed to provide a decision-procedure for a utilitarian who is confused as to how to act in a morally tricky situation. Thus, our fighter-pilot might consider the intensity of the pleasure of surviving versus the duration of the pain of death, while also needing to balance these factors against the relative certainty of the possible pains or pleasures. No doubt, the fighter pilot would still face an agonising moral choice but it seems that he would at least have some methodology for working out what Utilitarianism morally requires of him.

## 7. PROBLEMS WITH BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM

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However, whether or not measuring possible actions in terms of “units of pleasure” associated with them is actually plausible is very much an open question and so the problem of calculation is not necessarily solved simply by the existence of the Hedonic Calculus. Consider the most recent highly pleasurable experience that you enjoyed and compare it to a highly pleasurable experience from earlier in your life. It may be that you cannot say confidently that one provided more pleasure than the other, especially if the experiences were extremely varied; perhaps winning a sporting trophy versus going on your first holiday. Pleasures that are so

fundamentally different in nature may simply be incommensurable — they may be incapable of being measured by a common standard such as the Hedonic Calculus.

In addition, the problem of calculation can be extended beyond the issues raised above. Remember that Bentham's Utilitarianism is impartial in the sense that all individuals who gain pleasure as a result of a certain action count towards the total amount of pleasure. However, the following case raises the Problem of Relevant Beings:

You are considering whether or not to approve a new housing development on a piece of unoccupied land outside the current boundary of your town. You are clear that, if approved, the development will create a great deal of pleasure for both new residents and construction workers without any pain being experienced by others. You are aware, however, that the development will require the culling of several badgers and the removal of a habitat currently supporting many birds, stray cats and rodents of various types.

On the surface, this case should be obvious for the utilitarian without any special problem of calculation; the greatest good for the greatest number would be secured if the development were permitted to go ahead. However, this assumes that non-human animals are not relevant to the calculation of pleasures and pains. Yet, if pleasure is all that matters for how well a life goes then it is not clear why animals, that may be able to experience some form of pleasure and can almost certainly experience pain, should be excluded from the calculation process.

Indeed, Bentham, when referring to the moral value of animals, noted that: "The question (for deciding moral relevance) is not 'Can they reason?', nor 'Can they talk?', but 'Can they suffer?'"<sup>7</sup> If the suffering and pain of humans is relevant to moral calculations then surely it is at least plausible that so should the suffering and pain of non-human animals. (There is more on the issue of the

moral status of animals in when the morality of eating animals is investigated.)

Being a maximizing ethical theory, Utilitarianism is also open to a Demandingness Objection. If it is not the case that pleasure needs to be merely promoted but actually maximized at all opportunities, then the standard for acting morally appears to be set extremely high. For example, did you buy a doughnut at some point this year or treat yourself to a magazine? Live the life of a high-roller and treat yourself to a taxi ride rather than walking to your destination? While your actions certainly brought about differing degrees of pleasure to both yourself and to those who gained economic benefit from your decision, it seems that you could have created much more pleasure by saving up your money and ensuring it reached those suffering extreme financial hardships or residing in poverty around the world. As a result of being a maximizing moral theory, Utilitarianism seems to make immorality very hard to avoid as it is so utterly demanding on our behavior.

A further problem for Utilitarianism relates to the Tyranny of the Majority. Remember that as a relativistic moral theory, Utilitarianism does not allow for any moral absolutes — such as the absolute right to democracy, or absolute legal or basic human rights. Indeed, Bentham himself dismissed the idea of “natural rights” as a nonsensical concept masqueraded as a meaningful one. However, if we accept that absolute rights are simply “nonsense upon stilts” as Bentham put it, then Utilitarianism seems to be open to cases where the majority are morally required to exploit the minority for the greater good of maximizing total pleasure. For example, imagine that total pleasure would be maximised if the resources of a small country were forcibly taken from them to be used freely and exploited by the people of a much larger country (this is hardly unrealistic). However, such forceful theft — only justified by the fact that a greater majority of people would gain pleasure — does not seem to be morally justifiable. Yet, according to Utilitarianism’s commitment to maximising pleasure,

such an action would not only be morally acceptable but it would be morally required.

As a consequentialist/teleological moral theory Utilitarianism is also open to the Problem of Wrong Intentions. This problem can be highlighted by considering the cases of Dominic and Callum.

Dominic is seating in a coffee shop when a masked intruder bursts in threatening to rob the shop. Dominic, with the intention of saving lives, attempts to stop the intruder but sadly, in the ensuing struggle, the intruder's gun is accidentally fired and an innocent person is killed. Now, consider a second case where an intruder bursts in with a gun but Callum, rather than trying to intervene, immediately ducks for cover with the intention of saving himself and leaving the rest of the customers to fend for themselves. Luckily for Callum, when he ducks for cover he accidentally trips into the would-be thief, knocking him unconscious thus allowing his peaceful detention until police arrive.

According to the utilitarian calculation, Callum acted in a way that maximized pleasure while Dominic acted wrongly because the consequence of his act was tragic pain. However, it seems unfair and wrong to suggest that Callum acted rightly when he had just intended to save himself, although he had a lucky outcome, while Dominic acted wrongly when his intention was to save others but was unlucky in his outcome. Utilitarianism, as a consequentialist theory, ignores intentions and focuses only on consequences.

Utilitarianism also faces the Problem of Partiality. This is clear if we consider the familiar moral dilemma of being stuck on a life raft with three other people but with only enough supplies for two people. On the raft with you is a doctor who is confident that he can pass on a cure for cancer if he survives, a world class violinist who brings pleasure to millions each year, and one of your parents or siblings. I am afraid to report that, for the purposes of this example, your parent or sibling is nothing special in comparison to other individuals on the raft. In this circumstance, Utilitarianism would

seem to require you not only to give up your own space on the raft but ensure that your parent or sibling joins you in the freezing water with no hope of survival; this is the way of maximizing total pleasure in such a scenario. Yet, even if you believe that the morality might call for your own self-sacrifice, it seems extremely unfair not to allow you to give extra moral weight to the life of a loved one. Unfortunately for the utilitarian, perhaps, the status as a beloved family member should make no special difference to your judgment regarding how to act. This seems to be not only over-demanding but also overly cold and calculating. Utilitarianism requires Agent-Neutrality — you must look at the situation as any neutral observer would and not give special preference to anyone irrespective of your emotional attachments, because each individual must count for one and no more than one.

Finally, Bentham's Utilitarianism also comes under attack from the related Integrity Objection, framed most prominently by Bernard Williams (1929–2003). As an agent-neutral theory, no person can give up impartiality when it comes to judgments about the impact of a potential action upon their family or loved ones. In addition, no person can give up impartiality when it comes to the impact of an action upon their own feelings, character and general sense of integrity. In order to make clear the potential worry associated with this, Williams describes the fictional case of Jim and the Indians.<sup>8</sup>

Jim is an explorer who stumbles upon an Indian leader who is about to execute twenty people. Jim knows nothing of their possible crimes or any other factors involved, but he is offered a difficult choice by the Indian chief who is eager to impress his foreign traveler. Jim can either shoot one of the prisoners himself and then the rest will be set free as a mark of celebration, or he can refuse the offer in which case all twenty prisoners will be executed as was planned. It is key to note that Jim does not have control of the situation in the sense that he is powerless to bargain or negotiate with anyone, and nor can he use a weapon

to successfully free any prisoners. He has only the two options laid out.

The point of this example is not to establish what the right action is. You may find yourself in agreement with utilitarians who suggest Jim must shoot one prisoner in order to save the lives of the rest. Rather, the purpose of the example is to show that Utilitarianism forces us to reach this conclusion too quickly. Given the commitment to Agent-Neutrality, Jim must treat himself as a neutral observer working out which action will produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Morally, he is not entitled to give more weight to his own feelings than he would give to the feelings of any other and therefore it does not matter whether Jim is a pacifist and has been a lifelong advocate for prisoner reform and rehabilitation. If the utilitarian calculation suggests that he must shoot one of the prisoners then he must shoot with no regard to any compromising of his integrity and self-identity. You may accept this as an unfortunate consequence of a terrible situation, but it may be a problem for a moral theory if it fails to recognize or respect a person's most sincere and deepest convictions.

## 8. MILL'S UTILITARIAN PROOF

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John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was concerned by many of the problems facing the utilitarian theory put forward by Bentham, but as a hedonist he did not wish to see the theory rejected. Mill sought to refine and improve the Benthamite utilitarian theory in order to create a successful version of Hedonistic Utilitarianism.

Mill was so confident about the prospects for a version of Hedonistic Utilitarianism because he believed that there was an empirically backed proof available to support the principle that the greatest happiness/pleasure should always be secured for the greatest number.<sup>9</sup> Mill's proof, much like Bentham's empirical defense of Hedonism, relies on the evidence from observation that people desire their own happiness. This observation of fact

supports Mill's claim that since people desire their own happiness, this is evidence that such happiness is desirable. Mill says "...each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons".<sup>10</sup> Since our happiness is good for us, and general happiness is just the total of the happiness of all persons, then general happiness is also good. To put it another way, if individual happiness is a good worth pursuing then happiness in general must be worth pursuing.

In order to justify Hedonism, Mill sought to justify the claim that the good of happiness is the only thing that makes our lives go better. Mill defends this claim by suggesting that knowledge, health and freedom etc. (as other plausible goods that might make a life go better) are only valuable in so far as they bring about happiness. Knowledge is desired only because it provides happiness when acquired, not because it, by itself and in isolation, makes life go better.

Mill's proof of Utilitarianism in terms of the general desirability of maximizing total happiness is, however, open to criticism. For one thing, the fact that something is desired does not seem to justify the claim that it is desirable. G. E. Moore (1873–1958) points out that Mill moves from the factual sense that something is desirable if it is desired to the normative sense that it should be desired without any justification. It is possible, for example, to desire to kill another person. This is desirable in the sense people could and do desire it (it is possible to do so — it is an action that is desire-able), but not in the sense that we would want them to desire it.

In addition, the idea that other apparent goods, such as knowledge and health, are only valuable in so far as they promote happiness/pleasure is extremely controversial; can you imagine a situation in which you gained value from knowledge without any associated pleasure or happiness? If so, you may have a counter example to Mill's claim.



## 9. MILL'S QUALITATIVE UTILITARIANISM

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In attempting to redraw Bentham's Utilitarianism, Mill's most substantial thought was to move away from Bentham's idea that all that mattered was the quantity of total pleasure. Instead, Mill thought that quality of pleasure was also crucial to deciding what is moral.

Bentham's Utilitarianism is quantitative in the sense that all Bentham focuses on is the maximization of hedonically calculated quantities of total pleasure. Thus, he says that "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry".<sup>11</sup> All that matters for Bentham is producing pleasure and the way this is achieved is unimportant. If playing on a console affords you more pleasure than reading Shakespeare, then Bentham would view your life as going better if you play the console. However, Mill introduces a quality criterion for pleasure. Mill says that:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question.<sup>12</sup>

Bentham could not admit that the unhappy Socrates would be living a life with more value than the happier fool. Mill, on the other hand, believes that quality, not merely quantity, of pleasure matters and can therefore defend the claim that Socrates has the better life even by hedonistic standards.

According to Mill, higher pleasures are worth more than lower pleasures. Higher pleasures are those pleasures of the intellect brought about via activities like poetry, reading or attending the theater. Lower pleasures are animalistic and base; pleasures associated with drinking beer, having sex or lazing on a sun-lounger. What we should seek to maximize are the higher quality pleasures even if the total pleasure (hedonically calculated via Bentham's calculus) turns out to be quantitatively lower as a result.

Justifying this distinction between higher and lower quality pleasures as non-arbitrary and not just an expression of his own tastes, Mill says that competent judges, those people who have experienced both types of pleasure, are best placed to select which pleasures are higher and lower. Such competent judges, says Mill, would and do favor pleasures of the intellect over the base pleasures of the body. On this basis, Mill is open to the criticism that many people have both read books and drunk beer and that if given the choice would choose the latter. Whether or not Mill's defense of his supposedly non-prejudiced distinction of higher and lower pleasures is successful is an open question for your evaluation and analysis.

## 10. MILL'S RULE UTILITARIANISM VERSUS BENTHAM'S ACT UTILITARIANISM

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In addition to a difference in views regarding the importance of the quality of a pleasure, Mill and Bentham are also separated by reference to Act and Rule Utilitarianism and although such terms emerged only after Mill's death, Mill is typically considered a rule utilitarian and Bentham an act utilitarian.

An act utilitarian, such as Bentham, focuses only on the consequences of individual actions when making moral judgments. However, this focus on the outcome of individual acts can sometimes lead to odd and objection-raising examples. Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929–) raised the problem of the “transplant surgeon”.<sup>13</sup>

Imagine a case where a doctor had five patients requiring new organs to stop their death and one healthy patient undergoing a routine check. In this case, it would seem that total pleasure is best promoted by killing the one healthy patient, harvesting his organs and saving the other five lives; their pleasure outweighs the cost to the formerly healthy patient.

While Bentham does suggest that we should have “rules of

thumb” against such actions, for typically they will lead to unforeseen painful consequences, in the case as simply described the act utilitarian appears powerless to deny that such a killing is required in order to maximize total pleasure (just add your own details to secure this conclusion for the act utilitarian).

Rule utilitarians, in whose camp we can place Mill, adopt a different moral decision-procedure. Their view is that we should create a set of rules that, if followed, would produce the greatest amount of total happiness. In the transplant case, killing the healthy man would not seem to be part of the best set of utilitarian-justified rules since a rule allowing the killing of healthy patients would not seem to promote total happiness; one outcome, for example, would be that people would very likely stop coming to hospitals for fear for their life! Therefore, if a rule permitting killing was allowed then the maximization of total happiness would not be promoted overall.

It is through Rule Utilitarianism that we can make sense of Mill’s “harm principle”. According to Mill, there is:

...one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control.<sup>14</sup>

That principle is:

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.<sup>15</sup>

Even if a particular act of harming another person might bring about an increase in total pleasure on a single occasion, that act may not be condoned by the set of rules that best promotes total pleasure overall. As such, the action would not be morally permitted.

## 11. STRONG VERSUS WEAK RULE UTILITARIANISM

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Rule utilitarians may seem to avoid troubling cases like the transplant surgeon and be able to support and uphold individual human and legal rights based on rules that reflect the harm principle. This fact would also help rule utilitarians overcome objections based on the treatment of minorities because exploitation of minority groups would, perhaps, fail to be supported by the best utilitarian-justified set of rules. Yet, rule utilitarians face a troubling dilemma:

1. Strong Rule Utilitarianism: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness must always be followed.
2. Weak Rule Utilitarianism: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness can be ignored in circumstances where more happiness would be produced by breaking the rule.

The strong rule utilitarian appears to suffer from what J. J. C. Smart (1920–2012) described as “Rule Worship”. No longer focusing on the consequences of the action before them, the strong rule utilitarian appears to ignore the option to maximize total happiness in favor of following a general and non-relative rule regarding how to act. The strong rule utilitarian may be able to avoid problems based on treatment of minorities or a lack of absolute legal and human rights, but it is not clear that they survive these problems holding on to a teleological, relativistic utilitarian theory. Utilitarianism seems to be saved from troubling implications only by denying core features.

On the other hand, while Weak Rule Utilitarianism retains a teleological nature it appears to collapse into Act Utilitarianism. The rules provide guidelines that can be broken, and given that the act utilitarian can also offer “rules of thumb” against actions

that tend not to produce maximum goodness or utility in general, such as killing healthy patients, it is not clear where this version of Rule Utilitarianism gains a unique identity. In what cases would Act Utilitarianism and Weak Rule Utilitarianism actually provide different moral guidance? This is something you should consider in the light of your own examples or previous examples in this chapter.

## 12. COMPARING THE CLASSICAL UTILITIARIANS

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### Bentham

- Hedonist
- All pleasure equally valuable
- Act Utilitarian
- Teleological, impartial, relativistic, maximizing

### Mill

- Hedonist
- Quality of pleasure matters: intellectual versus animalistic
- Viewed as rule utilitarian
- If strong rule utilitarian, not clear if teleological or relativistic
- Impartial, maximizing theory

## 13. NON-HEDONISTIC CONTEMPORARY UTILITARIANISM: PETER SINGER AND PREFERENCE UTILITARIANISM

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Utilitarianism is not a dead theory and it did not end with Mill. Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) is considered to have taken over the baton after Mill, and R. M. Hare (1919–2002) was perhaps chief

advocate in the mid twentieth century. However, few contemporary philosophers can claim as much influence in public life outside philosophy as can the preference utilitarian, Peter Singer (1946–).

Singer advocates a non-hedonistic version of Utilitarianism. His utilitarian theory is teleological, maximizing, impartial and relativistic but he does not claim that the greatest good for the greatest number can be reduced to pleasure in either raw or higher forms. Instead, Singer believes that what improves a person's life is entirely determined by the satisfaction of their preferences. If you satisfy your preference to achieve a good qualification your life goes better in virtue of satisfying that preference. If someone else desires to get a job rather than continue in education, their life goes better for them if they secure their preference and gain employment. Individuals, according to Singer, must be at the core of moral thinking:

There would be something incoherent about living a life where the conclusions you came to in ethics did not make any difference to your life. It would make it an academic exercise. The whole point about doing ethics is to think about the way to live. My life has a kind of harmony between my ideas and the way I live. It would be highly discordant if that was not the case.<sup>16</sup>

On this basis, when making moral decisions we should consider how best to ensure the maximization of total preference satisfaction — it does not matter if our preference satisfaction fails to provide pleasure for us. Continuing to follow Bentham's commitment to impartiality, Singer also supports equal weighing of preferences when deciding which action better promotes greater preference satisfaction; all preferences are to weigh equally. This potentially leaves Singer open to the same issues that plagued Bentham. Namely, regarding circumstances where partiality seems desirable, or when the preferences of the majority seem to threaten a minority group, or require us to sacrifice our integrity. Further, the problem of calculation also seems to be relevant, because it is not obvious how you could work out the preferences

of others in at least some difficult moral cases (let alone the preferences of animals, if they are also relevant).

In response to a concern regarding the moral relevance of satisfying bloodthirsty or apparently immoral preferences, and counting such satisfaction as a moral achievement (consider the preferences of a nation of pedophiles, for example), we might look to the ideas of Richard Brandt (1910–1997). Brandt, writing about the rationality of certain preferences, suggested that rational preferences were those that might survive cognitive psychotherapy.<sup>17</sup> However, there is a question as to how arbitrary this requirement is and whether or not some unnerving preferences might form the core of certain individual characters therefore being sustained even after such therapy.

## SUMMARY

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Utilitarianism remains a living theory and retains hedonistic and non-hedonistic advocates, as well as supporters of both act and rule formulations. The core insight that consequences matter gives the theory some intuitive support even in the light of hypothetical cases that pose serious problems for utilitarians. The extent to which the different versions of Utilitarianism survive their objections is very much up to you as a critically-minded philosopher to decide.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Normative

Relativistic

Teleological

Consequentialist

Principle of Utility

Agent-Neutrality

Hedonic Calculus

Utility

Intrinsic

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1 R. Nozick, 'The Experience Machine', p. 292.

2 *Ibid.*

3 J. Bentham, 'An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation', in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, p. 65.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

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8 B. Williams, 'Jim and the Indians',\* [https://mafiadoc.com/jim-and-the-indians\\_5a32168b1723dd58974bf068.html](https://mafiadoc.com/jim-and-the-indians_5a32168b1723dd58974bf068.html)

9 This slippage from talk of "pleasure" to talk of "happiness" is explained in section eight of this chapter.

10 J. S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, p. 308.

11 J. Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, p. 206, <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6igN9srLgg8C>

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\*Update to link to source was made because the original source contained a dead link.



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## CHAPTER 25

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# *Utilitarianism: Strengths & Weaknesses*

NOAH LEVIN ( B.M. WOOLDRIDGE) INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS  
(LEVIN ET AL.) [HTTPS://HUMAN.LIBRETEXTS.ORG/  
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## **UTILITARIANISM: STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES** **B.M. WOOLDRIDGE**

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Consequentialism is a general moral theory that tells us that, in any given situation, we should perform those actions that lead to better overall consequences. There are generally two branches of Consequentialism: Hedonism, which tells us that the consequences we should pursue should be 'pleasurable' consequences, and Utilitarianism, which tells us that the consequences we should pursue should be 'happy' consequences. John Stuart Mill, one of the foremost Utilitarian moral theorists, sums up Utilitarianism as follows: "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."<sup>80</sup>

Any account of Utilitarianism will have two central tenets. First, Utilitarians are focused on states of affairs, which means that Utilitarianism is concerned with the result, or consequences, of one's actions, and disregards other features like one's motives or reasons for acting. One might have good motives or reasons for performing a certain action, but an action is only considered morally good for a Utilitarian if it maximizes the consequences, or happiness, of a given situation. Secondly, Utilitarians emphasize that agents are to be neutral in making their decisions. What this means is that under Utilitarianism, everyone counts for the same, and nobody counts for more than anybody else. Friends, family members, significant others, and anyone else important to you counts just the same as a complete stranger when making a moral decision.

On the face of it, this seems like a sensible moral theory. Like any other theory, Utilitarianism has its advantages and disadvantages. In this paper, I will argue that the disadvantages of Utilitarianism far outweigh the advantages. More specifically, I will argue that, despite its initial appeal, there are serious problems with Utilitarianism that render it a problematic moral theory. In what follows, I will consider a thought experiment from Bernard Williams to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of Utilitarianism, followed by a discussion of why Utilitarianism is a problematic moral theory.

To begin, consider the case of George. George has recently completed his PhD in Chemistry, and, like any other PhD candidate, finds it extremely difficult to land a job after completing his degree. George has a family, and his wife works hard to support them. While she is supportive of George, his difficulty finding a job puts a serious strain on their relationship. An older chemist who knows George tells George that he can get him a job in a laboratory. The laboratory pursues research into chemical and biological warfare. George, however, is opposed to chemical and biological warfare, and he therefore cannot accept the job. However, if George refuses

the job, it will go to a colleague of George's who does not have any reservations about chemical and biological warfare. Indeed, if this colleague takes the job, he will pursue the research with great zeal. For what it's worth, George's wife is not against chemical and biological warfare. Should George take the job?<sup>81</sup>

It seems that a Utilitarian would inform us that George should take the job, for doing so will lead to better overall consequences than turning down the job. In taking the job, George will not perform the research with great enthusiasm. Williams is not clear on whether George will actively sabotage the research, but it can be reasonably assumed that if George takes the job, he will perform his duties in such a way that will minimize the impact that chemical and biological research will have on developing weapons for war. While George will not directly be saving anyone, his work will indirectly lead to the saving of thousands of lives. Indeed, simply taking the job will ensure that someone who has great enthusiasm for chemical and biological warfare does not get the job. So even if George does not directly or indirectly save anyone while performing his duties, he will already have maximized the consequences by preventing someone who would do great harm from getting the job.

This thought experiment is useful in considering the strengths and weaknesses of Utilitarianism. Let us first begin with the strengths of the theory. Perhaps the biggest strength of Utilitarianism is that it is, at least *prima facie*, easier to reach a conclusion under this theory than other theories. That is, Utilitarianism provides us with a clear path for determining which action in a given situation will be the correct one: it is that action that will increase utility. This is in contrast to other moral theories, such as Deontology, which do not always provide a clear answer. Deontology, for example, focuses on the motives or reasons one has for acting, and it can be difficult sometimes to ascertain what one's motives and/or reasons are. Even if one explicitly outlines their motives or reasons, it is not always the case that this is

truthful. The consequences of an action, however, do provide us with a clear criterion for what counts as a morally good action. If one's action leads to good, or happy, consequences, then that action is morally permissible. Thus, Utilitarianism is a theory that can easily help us reach decisions.

Relating this to the case of George, George's actions can be judged on whether they will lead to better consequences. In this case, his action will lead to good consequences, albeit indirectly. In accepting the job, George prevents someone else who might indirectly harm others by promoting chemical and biological warfare from getting the job. Consider, for a moment, if we judged this action not on the consequences, but rather on the reasons or motives for acting. Suppose George accepts the job because he is motivated to end chemical and biological warfare, or that his reason for taking the job is to help support his family. While these reasons might be noble ones, we cannot be clear on whether these are actually the motives/reasons that George has. Motives and reasons, in other words, are not as clearly accessible as the consequences of an action.

Another strength of Utilitarianism is its emphasis on neutrality. When making a decision, one is to take a 'God's eye' view of things, and consider everyone equally. This emphasis on neutrality makes Utilitarianism an impartial moral theory, meaning it considers everyone's status and interests as equal. Relating this to the case of George, we see that George needs to assess the situation from a neutral perspective. He should not favour his or his family's interests as opposed to the interests of others who might be impacted by chemical and biological warfare. Even if his wife and family were against chemical and biological warfare, and even considering that George himself is against chemical and biological warfare, he needs to put these interests and considerations aside and make the decision that is best for everyone involved.

While Utilitarianism does have its strengths as a theory, it also has some very serious weaknesses, and in the remainder of this

paper I will outline of these weaknesses and argue why I think they make Utilitarianism a problematic moral theory.

We can begin by considering the point about neutrality. While Utilitarians will count this as a strength of their theory, it can also be considered a weakness of the theory. In considering everyone equally, Utilitarianism devalues the importance of personal relationships. In some cases, following Utilitarianism will force us to disregard those who are close to us. Suppose, for instance, that George's wife and children, like George, were also against chemical and biological warfare. Utilitarianism will tell us that George should disregard their interests and feelings and perform that action that will increase the consequences. But this seems to be impersonal. The interests, feelings, and desires of George's family should matter more than the interests, feelings, and desires of complete strangers, simply because these people are closer to George. Each of us has special relations to individuals that we work hard to develop, and that, in many cases, help us become better people. To disregard the interests, feelings, and desires of these individuals seems to be wrong.

I should also point out here that while Utilitarians will *consider* everyone equally, this does not mean that they will *treat* everyone equally. Consider another example from Williams. Suppose that there is a racial minority in a society. This minority does not harm anyone else in the society, nor does it do anything particularly good either. However, the other citizens, who make up the majority, have prejudices against this minority, and consider its presence very disagreeable, and proposals are put forward to remove this minority.<sup>82</sup> Williams is not clear on what would be involved in 'removing' the minority. The removal of the minority need not involve murder, although it could. It might involve, for example, removing them from society by forcing them to leave the society.

It seems that a Utilitarian would be forced to accept that eliminating this minority would increase the happiness for the

majority of people, and would therefore be a moral action. But this seems wrong, mainly because removing the minority from society would involve what many people take to be morally evil actions, which is another problem with Utilitarianism. In some cases, Utilitarianism might sanction morally evil actions in order to achieve morally desirable consequences. Removing the minority might involve genocide or mass deportations, both of which seem morally problematic. Killing people simply because they are of a certain race or ethnicity, and/or removing them from a society without just cause, are severe moral violations that any reasonable person could not sanction. The idea here is this: sometimes, in working to achieve the greatest overall consequences, individuals will be forced to do bad things, and these bad things, even if they increase happiness, are still bad. And it is a failing of Utilitarianism that it does not recognize the moral value of labeling these as morally bad actions.

At this point a Utilitarian will surely have something to say. A Utilitarian might respond to the above points as follows. All of the critiques I have offered are focused only on the short-term consequences, and not the long-term consequences. When we focus on the long-term consequences of the above cases, the Utilitarian answer will change. For example, if George takes the job, this might lead to good consequences in the immediate future. But in the long run, it might lead to bad consequences. It might, for example, cause a serious strain on his marriage, and make George unhappy, which will in turn affect his relationships with others. In the racial minority case, while removing the minority might lead to better consequences in the short term, it will lead to worse consequences in the long term. It will, for example, weaken the trust among members of a community, and destabilize the social relations of individuals within that community. In response to this, a Utilitarian might adopt a rule, the general following of which will lead to better long-term consequences. In so doing, a Utilitarian

switches the focus from a version of Utilitarianism that is focused on acts, to one that is focused on rules.

This response from a Utilitarian fails, in that it invites more questions than what it does answers. Mainly, just how far into the future should we look when considering the consequences of our actions? Utilitarians do not provide a clear answer to this question. Saying that we should focus on the long-term consequences of an action when the implications of the short-term consequences are troubling seems to be problematic. And, moreover, should we really follow a rule when, in the moment, we can perform an act that will increase the happiness of others? Adopting rule-utilitarianism as a way to respond to these objections seems not only ad-hoc, but also inconsistent with the Utilitarian maxim of increasing the consequences.

Overall, the theory of Utilitarianism, while perhaps initially appealing, seems to have some serious flaws. While the theory of Utilitarianism might help us more easily reach moral conclusions than what other theories do, and while it emphasizes the neutrality of moral agents, it does nonetheless have a tendency to alienate us from those we are closest to, and might require us to perform actions that, under other moral theories, are considered morally problematic. It is for these reasons that Utilitarianism is a problematic moral theory.



Utilitarianism: Strengths & Weaknesses by Noah Levin ( B.M. Wooldridge)  
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## CHAPTER 26

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# Deontology – Kantian Ethics

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## KANTIAN ETHICS

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In spite of its horrifying title Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is one of the small books which are truly great; it has exercised on human thought an influence almost ludicrously disproportionate to its size.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO KANTIAN ETHICS

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Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 in Königsberg in East Prussia, where he died in 1804. Kant is famous for revolutionizing how we think about just about every aspect of the world — including science, art, ethics, religion, the self and reality. He is one of the most important thinkers of all time, which is even more remarkable by the fact that Kant is a truly awful writer. His sentences are full of technical language, are very long, and are incredibly dense. You have been warned!

Kant is a rationalist writing during the Enlightenment (1685–1815). He thinks that we can gain knowledge from our senses and through our rational capacities. This means his general philosophical approach starts by asking what we can know a priori.

This is key to understanding his work but also makes his writing on ethics seem a bit odd. We think the study of ethics — unlike say math — ought to direct our eye to what is going on around us in the world. Yet Kant starts by turning his eyes “inward” to thinking about ethical ideas.

Kant believes that in doing this people will come to recognize that certain actions are right and wrong irrespective of how we might feel and irrespective of any consequences. For Kant, actions are right if they respect what he calls the Categorical Imperative. For example, because lying fails to respect the Categorical Imperative it is wrong and is wrong irrespective of how we might feel about lying or what might happen if we did lie; it is actions that are right and wrong rather than consequences. This means that Kant’s theory is deontological rather than teleological. It focuses on our duties rather than our ends/goals/consequences.

There is, however, something intuitive about the idea that morality is based on reason rather than feelings or consequences. Consider my pet cat Spartan. He performs certain actions like scrabbling under bed covers, meowing at birds and chasing his tail.

Now consider my daughter Beth, she performs certain actions like caring for her sister and helping the homeless.

Spartan's actions are not moral whereas Beth's actions are. Spartan's thinking and actions are driven by his desires and inclination. He eats and plays and sleeps when he desires to do so, there is no reasoning on his part. Beth, in contrast, can reflect on the various reasons she has, reasons to care for her sister and the homeless.

We might think then that humans are moral beings not because we have certain desires but precisely because we are rational. We have an ability to "stand back" and consider what we are doing and why. Kant certainly thought so and he takes this insight as his starting point.

## 2. SOME KEY IDEAS

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### Duty

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Kant's main works in ethics are his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Neither give practical advice about particular situations but rather through rational reflection, Kant seeks to establish the supreme principle of morality.

He starts from the notion of "duty" and although this is a rather old-fashioned term, the idea behind it should sound familiar. Imagine, your friend has told you that she is pregnant but asks you to promise to keep her secret. Through the coming weeks this juicy bit of gossip is on the tip of your tongue but you do not tell anyone because of your promise. There are things we recognise as being required of us irrespective of what we (really) desire to do. This is what Kant means by duty.

But this raises the question. If it is not desires that move us to do what is right (even really strong desires), what does? In our

example, why is it that we keep our promise despite the strong desire to gossip? Kant's answer is "the good will".

## Good Will

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Kant gives the following characterization of the good will. It is something that is good irrespective of effects:

A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes — because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone — that is, good in itself.<sup>2</sup>

It is also good without qualification.

It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.<sup>3</sup>

What does Kant mean? Well, pick anything you like which you think might make an action good — for example, happiness, pleasure, courage, and then ask yourself if there are any situations you can think of where an action having those features makes those actions worse?

It seems there are. Imagine someone who is happy when kicking a cat; or someone taking pleasure in torture; or a serial killer whose courage allows her to abduct children in broad daylight. In such cases the happiness, pleasure and courage make the actions worse. Kant thinks we can repeat this line of thinking for anything and everything, except one thing — the good will.

The good will unlike anything else is good unconditionally and what makes a good will good is willing alone; not other attitudes, or consequences, or characteristics of the agent. Even Kant thinks this sounds like a rather strange idea. So how can he (and we) be confident that the good will even exists?

Consider Mahatma Gandhi's (1869–1948) non-violent protest for Indian independence. He stood peacefully whilst the British police beat him. Here is a case where there must have been an overwhelming desire to fight back. But he did not. In this type

of action Kant would claim that we “see” the good will — as he says — “shining like a jewel”.<sup>4</sup> Seeing such resilience in the face of such awful violence we are humbled and can recognize, what Kant calls, its moral worth. Obviously not all actions are as significant as Gandhi’s! However, Kant thinks that any acts like this, which are performed despite conflicting desires, are due to the good will. Considering such actions (can you think of any?) means we can recognize that the good will exists.

### 3. ACTING FOR THE SAKE OF DUTY AND ACTING IN ACCORDANCE WITH DUTY

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From what we have said above about the nature of duty and good will we can see why Kant says that to act from good will is acting for the sake of duty. We act despite our desires to do otherwise. For Kant this means that acting for the sake of duty is the only way that an action can have moral worth. We will see below what we have to do for our actions to be carried out for the sake of duty. However, before we do this, we need to be really clear on this point about moral worth.

Imagine that you are walking with a friend. You pass someone begging on the street. Your friend starts to weep, fumbles in his wallet and gives the beggar some money and tells you that he feels such an empathy with the poor man that he just has to help him.

For Kant, your friend’s action has no moral worth because what is moving him to give money is empathy rather than duty! He is acting in accordance with duty. However, Kant does think your friend should be applauded as such an action is something that is of value although it wouldn’t be correct to call it a moral action.

To make this point clearer, Kant asks us to consider someone who has no sympathy for the suffering of others and no inclination to help them. But despite this:

...he nevertheless tears himself from his deadly insensibility and

performs the action without any inclination at all, but solely from duty then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to our friend, this person is acting for the sake of duty and hence their action is moral. We must be careful though. Kant is not telling us to become emotionally barren robots! He is not saying that before we can act morally we need to get rid of sympathy, empathy, desires, love, and inclinations. This would make Kant's moral philosophy an absurd non-starter.

Let us see why Kant is not saying this. Consider an action such as giving to others. We should ask whether an action of giving to others would have been performed even if the agent lacked the desire to do so. If the answer is "yes" then the act has moral worth. This though is consistent with the agent actually having those desires. The question for Kant is not whether an agent has desires but what moved the agent to act. If they acted because of those desires they acted in accordance with duty and their action had no moral worth. If they acted for the sake of duty, and just happened to have those desires, then their action has moral worth.

#### 4. CATEGORICAL AND HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES

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If we agree with Kant and want to act for the sake of duty what should we do? His answer is that we have to act out of respect for the moral law. He has two examples of how this works in practice: lying and suicide. We will consider Kant's example of suicide at the end of this chapter. However, before doing this we need to get a sense of what Kant has in mind when he talks about acting out of respect for the moral law.

The moral law is what he calls the "Categorical Imperative". He thinks there are three formulations of this.

CI-1: ...act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.<sup>6</sup>

CI-2: So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well

as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.<sup>7</sup>

CI-3: ...every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a lawmaking member in the universal kingdom of ends.<sup>8</sup>

We will consider these in turn, showing how they are linked. Consider then, CI-1.

Kant's idea is that we use this "test" to see what maxims are morally permissible. If we act in accordance with those then we are acting from duty and our actions have moral worth. Let us look at what this means.

Initially it is worth considering what "categorical" and "imperative" mean. An imperative is just a command. "Clean your room!" is an imperative I give my daughter every Saturday. "Do not park in front of these gates!" is a command on my neighbor's gate. "Love your God with all your heart, mind and soul" is a command from the Bible.

What about the "categorical" part? If a command is categorical then people ought to follow it irrespective of how they feel about following it, irrespective of what consequences might follow, or who may or may not have told them to follow it. For example, the command "do not peel the skin of babies" is categorical. You ought not to do this and the fact that this might be your life's ambition, or that you really want to do it, or that your teacher has told you to do it, is completely irrelevant.

Contrast this with Hypothetical Imperatives. If I tell my daughter to clean her room, this is hypothetical. This is because whether she ought to clean her room is dependent on conditions about her and me. If she does not care about a clean room and about what her dad thinks, then it is not true that she ought to clean her room. Most commands are hypothetical. For example, "study!" You ought to study only if certain things are true about you; for example, that you care about doing well, that you want to succeed in the test etc.

Kant thinks that moral "oughts" — for example, "you ought not

lie” — are categorical. They apply to people irrespective of how they feel about them.

The next thing we need is the idea of a “maxim”. This is relatively simple and is best seen through the following examples. Imagine I’m considering whether to make a false promise. Perhaps I think that by falsely promising you that I will pay you back I will be more likely to get a loan from you. In that case my maxim is something like “whenever I can benefit from making a false promise I should do so”.

Imagine I decide to exercise because I feel depressed, then I may be said to be acting on the maxim “Whenever I feel depressed I will exercise”. A maxim is a general principle or rule upon which we act. We do not decide on a set of maxims, perhaps writing them down, and then try to live by them but rather a maxim is the principle or rule that can make sense of an action whether or not we have thought about it in these terms.

## 5. THE FIRST FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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Let’s put these bits together in relation to CI-1

...act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.<sup>9</sup>

The “test” that CI-1 prescribes is the following. Consider the maxim on which you are thinking about acting, and ask whether you can either (i) conceive that it become a universal law, or (ii) will that it become a universal law. If a maxim fails on either (i) or (ii) then there is no good reason for you to act on that maxim and it is morally impermissible to do so. If it passes the CI test, then it is morally permissible.

Kant is not saying that the CI-1 test is a way of working out what is and what is not moral. Presumably we can think of lots of maxims, which are non-moral, which pass the test, for example, “whenever I am bored I will watch TV”.



Equally he is not saying that if a maxim cannot be universalized then it is morally impermissible. Some maxims are just mathematically impossible. For example, “whenever I am going to exercise I will do it for an above the average amount of time”. This maxim cannot be universalized because we cannot conceive that everyone does something above “average”.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the maxim must be able to be willed as a universal law. This is important because maxims such as “if your name is Jill and you are 5ft 11, you can lie” will fail to be universalized because you cannot will that your name is Jill or that your height is 5ft11. It has to be possible to will as a universal law and for this to be true it must be at least possible for it actually to come about. This shows that the common concern that we can get any maxim to pass the CI-1 test by simply adding more and more specific details, such as names, heights or locations, fails. This is very abstract (what did we tell you about Kant’s work!). Let us consider an example.

## 6. PERFECT AND IMPERFECT DUTIES

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Recall the example of making a false promise to secure a loan. The maxim is “whenever I can benefit from doing so, I should make a false promise”. The question is whether I could conceive or will that this become a universal law.

I could not. If everyone followed this maxim then we would all believe everyone else could make a false promise if it would benefit them to do so. Kant thinks such a situation is not conceivable because the very idea of making a promise relies on trust. But if “whenever it is of benefit to you, you can make false promises” was to become a universal law then there would be no trust and hence no promising. So by simply thinking about the idea of promising and lying we see the maxim will fail the test and, because we cannot universalize the maxim, then making a false promise becomes morally impermissible. This is true universally for all people in all

circumstances for anyone can, in principle, go through the same line of reasoning.

A maxim failing at (i) is what Kant calls a contradiction in conception, and failing at (i) means we are dealing with what Kant calls a perfect duty. In our example we have shown we have a perfect duty not to make false promises.

Consider another example. Imagine that someone in need asks us for money but we decide not to help them. In this case our maxim is “whenever someone is in need and asks for money do not give them money”. Does this pass the CI-1 test?

No it fails the CI-1 test. Although it is true that the maxim passes (i) not giving to the needy does not threaten the very idea of giving money away. Kant thinks that anyone thinking about this will see that that maxim will fail at (ii) and hence it is morally impermissible. Here is why.

You cannot know if you will be in need in the future and presumably you would want to be helped if you were in need. In which case you are being inconsistent if you willed that “people should not help those in need” should become a universal law. For you might want people to help those in need in the future, namely, you.

So we cannot will the maxim “whenever someone is in need do not help them” to become a universal moral law. Again this is a thought process that anyone can go through and it means that this moral claim is true universally for all people in all circumstances. Failing at (ii) is what Kant calls a contradiction in will, and failing at (ii) means we are dealing with what Kant calls an imperfect duty.

It is absolutely key to recognize that CI-1 is not simply asking “what if everyone did that?” CI-1 is not a form of Utilitarianism. Kant is not saying that it is wrong to make false promises because if people did then the world would be a horrible place. Rather Kant is asking about whether we can conceive or will the maxim to become a universal law.

## 7. SECOND FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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The second formulation (CI-2) is the following:

So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.<sup>10</sup>

Kant thinks that CI-1 and CI-2 are two sides of the same coin, though precisely how they are related is a matter of scholarly debate. Put very simply CI-2 says you should not use people, because if you do, you are failing to treat them as a rational agent and this is morally wrong.

For example, if I use your essay without your knowledge then I have not treated you as a rational agent. I would have done had I asked you for your essay and you had freely chosen to let me have it. But given that I did not ask you, I was in a sense making choices on your behalf and thus did not treat you as a rational agent. So according to Kant I should always treat you as an end not a means. I should always treat you as a free rational agent.

Kant's theory then has a way of respecting the dignity of people. We should treat people with respect and with dignity purely on the basis that they are rational agents, and not because of their race, gender, education, upbringing etc. From this you can also see that Kant's theory allows us to speak about "rights". If someone has a right then they have this right irrespective of gender, education, upbringing etc. For example, Jill has a right to free speech because she is a person, consequently that right will not disappear if she changes her location, personal circumstances, relationship status, political viewpoint etc. After all she does not stop being a person.

Importantly, CI-2 does not say that you either treat someone as a means or an end. I could treat someone as an end by treating them as a means. Suppose that you have freely decided to become a taxi driver. If I use you as a means by asking you to take me to the airport I am also treating you as an end. But Kant does not believe

this to be morally wrong because I am respecting you as a rational agent; after all, you chose to be a taxi driver. Of course, if I get into your car and point a gun at your head and ask to be taken to the airport then I am not treating you as an end but rather solely as a means, which is wrong.

## 8. THE THIRD FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AND SUMMARY

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The final formulation of the Categorical Imperative is a combination of CI-1 and CI-2. It asks us to imagine a kingdom which consists of only those people who act on CI-1. They never act on a maxim which cannot become a universal law. In such a kingdom people would treat people as ends, because CI-2 passes CI-1. This is why CI-3 is often called the “Kingdom of Ends” formulation:

...every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a lawmaking member in the universal kingdom of ends.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, we have seen that Kant thinks that acts have moral worth only if they are carried out for the sake of duty. Agents act for the sake of duty if they act out of respect for the moral law, which they do by following the Categorical Imperative in one of its formulations.

Consequently, Kant thinks that acts are wrong and right universally, irrespective of consequences and desires. If lying is wrong then it is wrong in all instances. From all this, it follows that we cannot be taught a set of moral rules for each and every situation and Kant believes that it is up to us to work it out for ourselves by thinking rationally.

There have been, and continue to be, many books and journal articles written about Kant’s ethics. He has a profound and deep insight into the nature of morality and he raises some fundamental questions about what it is to be human. Kant’s moral theory is radically Egalitarian as his theory is blind to individual personal

circumstances, race, gender and ethnicity. Everyone is equal before the moral law!

Related to this, his theory respects the rights of individuals and, relatedly, their dignity. Any theory that is to have a hope of capturing our notion of rights needs to be able to respect the thought that a right is not something that disappears if circumstances change. Jill has a right to life, period; we do not say Jill has a right to life “if...” and then have to fill in the blanks. This is precisely something that Kant’s theory can give us. CI-1 generates maxims which do not have exceptions and CI-2 tells us that we should always treat everyone as an end in themselves and never solely as a means to an end. It tells us, for example, that we ought not to kill Jill, and this holds true in all circumstances.

There are, though, a number of tough questions that Kant’s work raises. We consider some of these below. However, as with all the philosophical ideas we discuss in this book, Kant’s work is still very much alive and has defenders across the world. Before we turn to these worries, we work through an example that Kant gives regarding suicide.

## 9. KANT ON SUICIDE

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Kant is notoriously stingy with examples. One he does mention is suicide (another is lying). This is an emotive topic and linked to questions about mental health and religion. An attraction of Kant’s view is the ability to apply his Categorical Imperatives in a dispassionate way. His framework should allow us to “plug in” the issue and “get out” an answer. Let’s see how this might work.

Kant thinks that suicide is always wrong and has very harsh words for someone who attempts suicide

He who so behaves, who has no respect for human nature and makes a thing of himself, becomes for everyone an Object of freewill. We are free to treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for our sport as we do a horse or a dog, for he is no longer a

human being; he has made a thing of himself, and, having himself discarded his humanity, he cannot expect that others should respect humanity in him.<sup>12</sup>

But why does he think this? How does this fit with Kant's Categorical Imperatives? We will look at the first two formulations.

Fundamental to remember is that for Kant the motive that drives all suicide is "avoid evil". By which he means avoiding suffering, pain, and other negative outcomes in one's life. All suicide attempts are due to the fact that we love ourselves and thus want to "avoid evils" that may befall us.

Imagine then that I decide to commit suicide. Given what we have just said about my motives this means I will be acting on this maxim: "From self-love I make as my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction".<sup>13</sup>

Following CI-1 the question then is whether it is possible to universalize this maxim? Kant thinks not. For him it is unclear how we could will it that all rational agents as the result of self-love can destroy themselves when their continued existence threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction. For Kant self-love leading to the destruction of the self is a contradiction. Thus he thinks that we have a perfect (rather than an imperfect) duty to ourselves not to commit suicide. To do so is morally wrong. This is how Kant puts it:

One sees at once a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would destroy life [suicide] by means of the very same feeling that acts so as to stimulate the furtherance of life [self-love], and hence there could be no existence as a system of nature. Therefore, such a maxim cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature and is, consequently, wholly opposed to the supreme principle of all duty.

Notice a few odd things here in relation to CI-1. The point about universalization seems irrelevant. Kant could have just said it is a contradiction to will from self-love the destruction of oneself. It seems that there is nothing added by asking us to consider this

point universalized. It does not add weight to the claim that it is a contradiction.

Second, it is not really a “contradiction” at all! It is different to the lying promise example. In this it seems that the very concept of a promise relies on trust, which lying would destroy. In contrast in the suicide case the “contradiction” seems more like a by-product of Kant’s assumption regarding the motivation of suicidal people. So we can avoid the “contradiction” if we allow for the possibility that suicide need not be driven by self-love. If this were true then there would be no “contradiction”. Hence, it seems wrong to call the duty not to kill oneself — if such a duty exists — a “perfect” duty. So the first formulation does not give Kant the conclusion that suicide is morally wrong.

Moving to the second formulation. This helps us understand Kant’s harsh assessment of people attempting suicide. Remember he calls such people “objects” or “beasts” or “things”. So, what is the difference between beasts or objects or things, and humans? The answer is that we are rational. Recall, that for Kant our rationality is of fundamental value. If anyone’s actions do not recognize someone else’s rationality then they have done something morally wrong. This amounts to treating them as merely means to our own end. Given all this you can see what Kant is getting at. For him committing suicide is treating yourself as a mere means to some end — namely the end of avoiding pain and suffering etc. — and not an end in itself. You are treating yourself as a “beast” a “thing” an “object”, not as a human being with the gift of reason. This is morally wrong.

Moreover, if you do this, then others treating you with respect as a rational person can conclude that you also want others to treat you in this way. Because if you are rational then you must think that it is OK to universalize the maxim that we can treat others as objects, beast and thing. They can thus treat you as a beast, object, and thing and still be treating you with respect as a rationale agent. With regard to attempting suicide your action is wrong because you

have ignored your own rationality. You have treated yourself as a mere means to an end.

But, like the first formulation this is very weak. It is unclear why in attempting suicide you are treating yourself as a mere means to an end. You might think you are respecting your rationality by considering suicide. Recall, Kant says that it is sometimes fine to treat people as a means to an end, e.g. a taxi driver. It is fine where people have given consent for you to treat them that way. In that case, suicide might be like the taxi driver case. We have freely decided to treat ourselves as a means to an end. We are, then, treating ourselves as a rational agent and not doing something morally wrong by committing suicide.

There are some other things that Kant says about the wrongness of suicide that do not link to the Categorical Imperatives. For example, he talks about humans being the property of God and hence our lives not being something we can choose to extinguish. However, we need not discuss this here.

There is a consensus between Kant scholars that, as it stands, Kant's argument against suicide fails. There are some though who use Kant's ideas as a starting point for a more convincing argument against suicide. For example, see J. David Velleman (1999) and Michael Cholbi (2000).

## 10. PROBLEMS AND RESPONSES: CONFLICTING DUTIES

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If moral duties apply in all circumstances, then what happens when we have duties which conflict? Imagine that you have hidden some Jewish people in your basement in Nazi Germany. Imagine then that an SS officer knocks at your door and asks if you are hiding Jews? What might Kant's theory tell us to do? Our duty is to refrain from lying so does this mean we are morally required to tell the SS officer our secret? If this is the conclusion then it makes Kant's theory morally repugnant.

However, there is no requirement in Kant's theory to tell the



truth, there is just a requirement not to lie. Lying is about intentional deceit, so maybe in this example there is a way not to lie. For example, if we simply stayed silent.

Even if we respond in this sort of way in this example, presumably we can engineer an example that would not allow for this. For example, perhaps we are in a law court and the SS officer asks us under oath. In that example, silence would not be an option. This certainly would seem to count against Kant's theory for it does seem morally wrong to reveal the location of the Jewish people.

The main point though is that Kant thinks we need to take the features of each individual situation into account. He does not just want us to mindlessly apply generic rules whilst paying no attention to what is before us. So Peter Rickman writes regarding these types of cases:

...it should be plain that more than one imperative/moral principle is relevant to the situation. Certainly we should tell the truth; but do we not also have a duty to protect an innocent man from harm? Further, do we not have an obligation to fight evil? We are confronted with a conflict of values here. Unfortunately, as far as I know, there is no explicit discussion of this issue in Kant. One could assume, however, that his general approach of distinguishing the lesser from the greater evil should be applied. I think Kant might say that although lying is never right, it might be the lesser evil in some cases.<sup>14</sup>

So the point is not that these sorts of examples are "knock down" criticisms of Kant's theory but rather that Kant's theory is under-specified and fails to give guidance with these specific sorts of cases. In fact, we might think that this is an advantage of his theory that has given us the supreme principle of morality and the general way of proceeding but has left it up to us to work out what to do in each situation. We will leave the reader to see if this can be done and in particular, whether it can be done in a way consistent with the other aspects of his moral theory.

## 11. PROBLEMS AND RESPONSES: THE ROLE OF INTUITIONS

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One of the most common criticisms leveled at Kant's theory is that it is simply counter intuitive. For example, lying, for him, is morally impermissible in all instances irrespective of the consequences. Yet we seem to be able to generate thought experiments that show that this is a morally repugnant position.

However, in Kant's defense we might ask why we should use our intuitions as any form of test for a moral theory. Intuitions are notoriously fickle and unreliable. Even if you pick the oddest view you can think of, you would probably find some people at some point in time that would find this view "intuitive". So how worried should we be if Kant's theory leads to counter intuitive consequences? This then raises a more general methodological question to keep at the forefront of your mind when reading this book. What role, if any, should intuitions have in the formation and the testing of moral theory?

## 12. PROBLEM AND RESPONSES: CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES AND ETIQUETTE

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Kant argues that what we are morally required to do is a matter of reason. If people reason in the right way then they will recognize, for example, that lying is wrong. However, some philosophers, for example Philippa Foot (1920–2010), have worried about this link to reason. The strength of Foot's challenge is that she agrees that morality is a system of Categorical Imperatives but says that this need not be due to reason.

Foot uses the example of etiquette to motivate her argument.<sup>15</sup> Rules of etiquette seem to be Categorical Imperatives but are not grounded in reason. Consider an example. I had a friend at university who was a sportsman. He was in many teams, his degree was in sports and exercise and if there were ever a spare minute

he would be running, on his bike or in the pool. Unsurprisingly he wore a tracksuit and trainers all the time!

During our second year at university a mutual friend died. There was a big formal funeral arranged. My friend decided to go to this funeral in his tracksuit and trainers. I asked him about this and his response was that it was what he liked wearing. However, to my mind at least, this reason, which was based on his desire, did not change the fact that he really ought not have worn a tracksuit. Foot would agree and thinks that rules of etiquette are categorical because they are not dependent on any particular desires someone would have.

However, even if they are categorical, Foot thinks that rules of etiquette are not rules of reason. We do not think that if we reasoned correctly we would recognize that we ought not to wear tracksuits to funerals, or (to think of some other rules of etiquette) we ought not to reply to a letter written in the third person in the first person, or we ought not to put our feet on the dinner table during a meal etc. It is not simply a matter of thinking in the right way but rather to recognize these “oughts” as part of a shared cultural practice.

So although this does not show that Kant is wrong, it does throw down a challenge to him. That is, we need independent reasons to think that the categorical nature of moral “oughts” are based on reason and not just part of a shared cultural practice. To respond to this challenge, the Kantian would have to put forward the argument that in the particular case of moral “oughts”, we have a good argument to ground the categorical nature in reason rather than institutional practices.

### 13. PROBLEMS AND RESPONSES: THE DOMAIN OF MORALITY

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Kant thinks that the domain of morality is merely the domain of reasons and as far as we are agents who can reason then we have

duties and rights and people ought to treat us with dignity. The flip side of this is that non-rational agents, such as non-human animals, do not have rights and we can, according to Kant, treat them as we like!

The challenge to Kant's theory is that the scope of morality seems bigger than the scope of reasons. People do think that we have moral obligations toward non-rational agents. Consider someone kicking a cat. We might think that morally they ought not to do this. However, Kant's theory does not back this up because, as far as we know, cats are not rational agents. Despite it not being wrong to treat animals in this way, Kant still thinks that we should not, because if we did, then we would be more likely to treat humans in this way.

## SUMMARY

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Kant's moral theory is extremely complicated and badly expressed. However, it is hugely influential and profound. As a system builder Kant's work starts with rational reflection from which he attempts to develop a complete moral system.

He starts from the notion of duty. He shows that what allows us to act for the sake of duty is the good will, and that the good will is unconditionally good. If we want to act for the sake of duty we need to act out of respect for the moral law and this amounts to following the Categorical Imperative. Kant argues that in following the Categorical Imperative, agents will converge on what is morally permissible. Hence Kant can talk about absolute and objective moral truths.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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A priori

Categorical Imperative

Deontological  
 Duty  
 Egalitarian  
 Good will  
 Hypothetical Imperative  
 Maxim  
 Rationalist  
 Rights

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4 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

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## *Deontology: Strengths & Weaknesses*

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Recall that:

- Deontology is a universal ethical theory that considers whether an action itself is right or wrong.
- Deontologists argue that you can never know what the results will be so it doesn't make sense to decide whether something is ethical based on outcomes. You can consider it the opposite of consequentialism and utilitarianism in many ways.
- Deontologists live in world of moral rules: It is wrong to steal. It is right to keep promises.
- Deontology is also concerned with intentions. If you intended good through your action, then the action is good, no matter what actually happened as a result.
- Deontology encompasses two kinds of approaches: duty-

based and rights-based.

### What is duty-based ethics?

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Duty-based ethics says that there are universal moral norms or rules, and it is essential that everyone follows them. If you've ever said, "I did it because it was the right thing to do," then you've employed duty-based ethics.

Duty-based ethics maintains that you should follow an ethical code without considering the consequences of your actions. If an act is by its nature right, you should perform that act even if someone is harmed as a result. If an act is by its nature wrong, you should *not* perform that act even if someone might be helped. For example, if by definition stealing is wrong, you do not steal. If by definition lying is wrong, you do not lie.

When you think about duties, think about obligations that individuals must accept in order for society to work and be well. Your duties and obligations come from both your personal and professional lives. If you are a parent, you are obligated to take care of your children. If you see someone in distress, you have a duty as a human to try and help.

The duties themselves may be tied to professional roles, too. Teachers have a duty to grade students fairly; police officers have a duty to enforce the law; psychologists have a duty to respect the confidentiality of their patients. When you encounter codes of professional conduct—either written or unwritten—likely you are dealing with duty-based ethics.

### What is rights-based ethics?

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An outgrowth of duty-based ethics, rights-based ethics insists that



you need to respect individual's human rights and never treat people as a means to an end.

A **right** is something you are entitled to. In terms of ethics, it is the treatment you should be able to expect from other people. For example, under most ethical codes, as a human you are entitled—have a right—to exist in safety.

Another way of stating this idea is that you have a right not be harmed by anyone. When the idea is put that way, it is apparent that duties and rights are closely related concepts. You have a right to exist in safety, which means that other people have a duty not to harm you.

Since duties and rights are so closely related, a version of a duty-based ethics can be created by identifying the *rights* that someone has a *duty* to respect.

Rights-based ethics are built upon four claims. Rights are

- “*natural* insofar as they are not invented or created by governments,”
- “*universal* insofar as they do not change from country to country,”
- “*equal* in the sense that rights are the same for all people, irrespective of gender, race, or handicap,” and
- “*inalienable* which means that I cannot hand over my rights to another person, such as by selling myself into slavery.” ([Fieser, n.d.](#))

A noteworthy example of an argument grounded in rights-based ethics is found in the [Declaration of Independence](#), where Thomas Jefferson states that humans are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” By drawing attention to these *rights*, Jefferson provides the context for a lengthy list of the ways in which George III had not fulfilled his *duty* to uphold these rights.

Remember that deontology is a universal system, so that means

any rights that you claim you also have to grant to all others. If you believe your family has a right to drinking water, then this means everyone in the world has that same right. If you believe that you have a right to marry the person you choose, then so does everyone else.

## The Strengths of Deontology

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As we discussed in utilitarianism, a flaw with consequentialist thinking is that we can never really know what the results of an action will be. History is full of examples of “unintended consequences.” For example, in an attempt to raise standards and accountability in public schools, high stakes testing became common. To ensure that the tests were taken seriously, school districts held teachers responsible for their students’ scores; teachers whose students did well would get raises, while those who did poorly could be fired. The proponents of this policy predicted that children’s learning would improve. It seemed to be working: in Atlanta; students were showing extraordinary gains in the yearly competency tests. Then an investigation by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* revealed that teachers and principals were correcting the answers provided by students. This scandal rocked the Atlanta school system and as of 2015, eleven teachers were convicted on racketeering charges. This certainly is not what the high-stakes testing supporters had thought would happen!

Because of such examples, deontologists disdain the uncertainty of consequentialist ethics. The future is unpredictable; we should only make judgments on things we are certain about. We know whether an action is inherently right or wrong as we’re doing it.

Another good point about deontology is its emphasis on the value of every human. While utilitarians consider everyone equal, it’s more of a numbers game. But a deontologist insists that you treat everyone with respect and give everyone the rights you

expect to have yourself. It works against our tendency to be self-centered.

Finally, deontology gives credit for intentions and motivations. You may do something for the very best reasons and it could turn out negatively. Does that condemn your action as unethical? A deontologist would say no. Accidents happen, results are uncertain, and you can't be held responsible for the future.

### The Weaknesses of Duty and Rights-Based Ethic

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Both duty and rights-based ethics are forms of universalism because they rely on principles that must be applied at all times to all people. Some people object that the universalism of duty and rights-based ethics make these theories too inflexible.

Both also rely on absolute principles regarding duties and rights. But there's no definitive list recorded anywhere. One person might say parents have a right to spank their children, but others will disagree. In the case of duty-based ethics, people may object to the principle that people deciding on a course of action should ignore the circumstances in which they and other individuals find themselves. Duty ethics allows little room for context. In *Les Misérables*, was Jean Valjean wrong to steal bread to feed his starving sister's children? Would it have been wrong to lie to a Gestapo officer asking where Jews were hidden or to slave-catchers in pursuit of runaways in the pre-war South? Some would say that the answers depend upon the circumstances and options available to us, rather than on it being the case that certain types of actions are always and necessarily wrong.

Duty-based ethics accepts as a principle that one should never use another person merely as a means to someone else's ends. So it would never be justified to cause the death of one to save several. But is that action *always* wrong, as a duty ethicist would argue? Societies regularly sacrifice individuals. For example, people

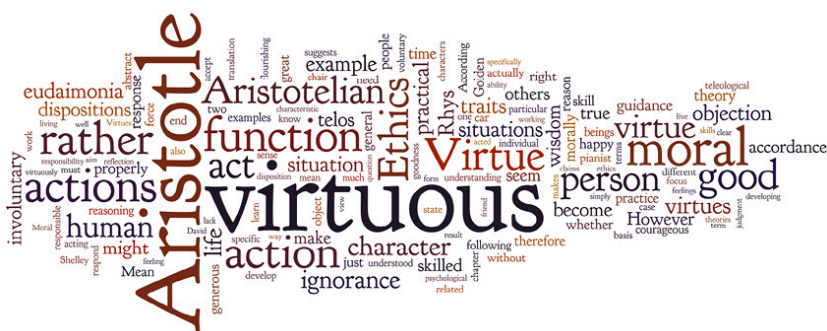
are drafted into armies and regularly sent into battle, even though it is certain that some of them will die. Is it ethical for a government to draft people and send them into harm's way? Is this a case of treating a person as a means to an end?

We have seen that duty and rights-based ethics are 'flip sides' of the same coin. One theory emphasizes how people should behave toward each another; the other emphasizes that an individual should be confident that her human rights will be acknowledged and respected. So the above example could be rewritten from the perspective of the rights-based approach. A person has a right to be respected on her own account rather than treated as a means to an end, yet we see that societies regularly sacrifice their members. The universalism of rights-based ethics does not appear to allow for this societal choice.



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## ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS



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## 1. ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS INTRODUCTION

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Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a scholar in disciplines such as ethics, metaphysics, biology and botany, amongst others. It is fitting, therefore, that his moral philosophy is based around assessing the broad characters of human beings rather than assessing singular acts in isolation. Indeed, this is what separates Aristotelian Virtue Ethics from both Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics.

## 2. THE FUNCTION ARGUMENT

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Aristotle was a teleologist, a term related to, but not to be confused with, the label “teleological” as applied to normative ethical theories such as Utilitarianism. Aristotle was a teleologist because he believed that every object has what he referred to as a final cause. The Greek term *telos* refers to what we might call a purpose, goal, end or true final function of an object. Indeed, those of you studying Aristotle in units related to the Philosophy of Religion may recognize the link between Aristotle’s general teleological worldview and his study of ethics.

Aristotle claims that “...for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function”.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle’s claim is essentially that in achieving its function, goal or end, an object achieves its own good. Every object has this type of a true function and so every object has a way of achieving goodness. The *telos* of a chair, for example, may be to provide a seat and a chair is a good chair when it supports the curvature of the human bottom without collapsing under the strain. Equally, says Aristotle, what makes good sculptors, artists and flautists is the successful and appropriate performance of their functions as sculptors, artists and flautists.

This teleological (function and purpose) based worldview is the necessary backdrop to understanding Aristotle’s ethical reasoning. For, just as a chair has a true function or end, so Aristotle believes

human beings have a telos. Aristotle identifies what the good for a human being is in virtue of working out what the function of a human being is, as per his Function Argument.

### Function Argument

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1. All objects have a telos.
2. An object is good when it properly secures its telos.  
Given the above, hopefully these steps of the argument are clear so far. At this point, Aristotle directs his thinking towards human beings specifically.
3. The telos of a human being is to reason.
4. The good for a human being is, therefore, acting in accordance with reason.

In working out our true function, Aristotle looks to that feature that separates man from other living animals. According to Aristotle, what separates mankind from the rest of the world is our ability not only to reason but to act on reasons. Thus, just as the function of a chair can be derived from its uniquely differentiating characteristic, so the function of a human being is related to our uniquely differentiating characteristic and we achieve the good when we act in accordance with this true function or telos.

The notion that man has a true function may sound odd, particularly if you do not have a religious worldview of your own. However, to you especially Aristotle wrote that "...as eye, hand, foot and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?"<sup>3</sup>

On the basis that we would ascribe a function to our constituent parts — we know what makes a good kidney for example — so too Aristotle thinks it far from unreasonable that we have a function as a whole. Indeed, this may be plausible if we consider other objects. The component parts of a car, for example, have individual

functions but a car itself, as a whole, has its own function that determines whether or not it is a good car.

### 3. ARISTOTELIAN GOODNESS

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On the basis of the previous argument, the good life for a human being is achieved when we act in accordance with our telos. However, rather than leaving the concept of goodness as general and abstract we can say more specifically what the good for a human involves. Aristotle uses the Greek term *eudaimonia* to capture the state that we experience if we fully achieve a good life. According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the state that all humans should aim for as it is the aim and end of human existence. To reach this state, we must ourselves act in accordance with reason. Properly understanding what Aristotle means by *eudaimonia* is crucial to understanding his Virtue Ethical moral position.

*Eudaimonia* has been variously translated and no perfect translation has yet been identified. While all translations have their own issues, *eudaimonia* understood as flourishing is perhaps the most helpful translation and improves upon a simple translation of happiness. The following example may make this clearer.

Naomi is an extremely talented pianist. Some days, she plays music that simply makes her happy, perhaps the tune from the television soap opera “Neighbors” or a rendition of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”. On other days, she plays complex music such as the supremely difficult Chopin-Godowsky *Études*. These performances may also make Naomi happy, but she seems to be flourishing as a pianist only with the latter performances rather than the former. If we use the language of function, both performances make Naomi happy but she fulfills her function as a pianist (and is a good pianist) only when she flourishes with the works of greater complexity.

Flourishing in life may make us happy but happiness itself is not necessarily well aligned with acting in accordance with our



telos. Perhaps, if we prefer the term happiness as a translation for eudaimonia we mean really or truly happy, but it may be easier to stay with the understanding of eudaimonia as flourishing when describing the state of acting in accordance with our true function.

Aristotle concludes that a life is eudaimon (adjective of eudaimonia) when it involves "...the active exercise of the mind in conformity with perfect goodness or virtue".<sup>4</sup> Eudaimonia is secured not as the result exercising of our physical or animalistic qualities but as the result of the exercise of our distinctly human rational and cognitive aspects.

#### 4. EUDAIMONIA AND VIRTUE

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The quotation provided at the end of section three was the first direct reference to virtue in the explanatory sections of this chapter. With Aristotle's theoretical presuppositions now laid out, we can begin to properly explain and evaluate his conception of the virtues and their link to moral thinking.

According to Aristotle, virtues are character dispositions or personality traits. This focus on our dispositions and our character, rather than our actions in isolation, is what earns Aristotelian Virtue Ethics the label of being an agent-centered moral theory rather than an act-centered moral theory.

#### Act-Centered Moral Theories

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Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics are two different examples of act-centered moral theories due to their focus on actions when it comes to making moral assessments and judgments. Act-centered moral theories may be teleological or deontological, absolutist or relativist, but they share a common worldview in that particular actions are bearers of moral value — either being right or wrong.

## Agent-Centered Moral Theories

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Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is an agent-centered theory in virtue of a primary focus on people and their characters rather than singular actions. For Aristotle, morality has more to do with the question “how should I be?” rather than “what should I do?” If we answer the first question then, as we see later in this chapter, the second question may begin to take care of itself. When explaining and evaluating Aristotelian Virtue Ethics you must keep in mind this focus on character rather than specific comments on the morality of actions.

Aristotle refers to virtues as character traits or psychological dispositions. Virtues are those particular dispositions that are appropriately related to the situation and, to link back to our function, encourage actions that are in accordance with reason. Again, a more concrete example will make clear how Aristotle identifies virtues in practice.

All of us, at one time or another, experience feelings of anger. For example, I may become angry when my step-son thoughtlessly eats through the remaining crisps without saving any for others, or he may feel anger when he has to wait an extra minute or two to be picked up at work because his step-father is juggling twenty-six different tasks and momentarily loses track of time (how totally unfair of him...). Anyway, as I was saying, back to Aristotle, “Anyone can become angry — that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not easy”.<sup>5</sup>

For Aristotle, virtue is not a feeling itself but an appropriate psychological disposition in response to that feeling; the proper response. The correct response to a feeling is described as acting on the basis of the Golden Mean, a response that is neither excessive nor deficient. The table below makes this more apparent.

| Feeling/Emotion | Vice of Deficiency | Virtuous Disposition (Golden Mean) | Vice of Excess |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| Anger           | Lack of spirit     | Patience                           | Irascibility   |
| Shame           | Shyness            | Modesty                            | Shamefulness   |
| Fear            | Cowardice          | Courage                            | Rashness       |
| Indignation     | Spitefulness       | Righteousness                      | Envy           |

Anger is a feeling and therefore is neither a virtue nor a vice. However, the correct response to anger — the Golden Mean between two extremes — is patience, rather than a lack of spirit or irascibility. Virtues are not feelings, but characteristic dispositional responses that, when viewed holistically, define our characters and who we are.

The Golden Mean ought not to be viewed as suggesting that a virtuous disposition is always one that gives rise to a “middling” action. If someone puts their life on the line, when unarmed, in an attempt to stop a would-be terrorist attack, then their action may be rash rather than courageous. However, if armed with a heavy, blunt instrument their life-risking action may be courageously virtuous rather than rash. The Golden Mean is not to be understood as suggesting that we always act somewhere between complete inaction and breathless exuberance, but as suggesting that we act between the vices of excess and deficiency; such action may well involve extreme courage or exceptional patience.

In addition to feelings, Aristotle also suggests that we may virtuously respond to situations. He suggests the following examples.

| Situation      | Vice of Deficiency | Virtuous Disposition (Golden Mean) | Vice of Excess        |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Social conduct | Cantankerousness   | Friendliness                       | Self-serving flattery |
| Conversation   | Boorishness        | Wittiness                          | Buffoonery            |
| Giving money   | Stinginess         | Generosity                         | Profligacy            |

We must keep in mind the agent-centered nature of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics when considering these examples. A person does not cease to have a witty disposition in virtue of a single joke that might err on the side of buffoonery, or cease to be generous because they fail to donate to charity on one occasion. Our psychological dispositions, virtuous or not, are only to be assessed by judgment of a person's general character and observation over more than single-act situations. If we act in accordance with reason and fulfill our function as human beings, our behavior will generally reflect our virtuous personality traits and dispositions.

## 5. DEVELOPING THE VIRTUES

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In a quote widely attributed to Aristotle, Will Durrant (1885–1981) sums up the Aristotelian view by saying that “...we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit”.<sup>6</sup> It is fairly obvious that we cannot become excellent at something overnight. Making progress in any endeavor is always a journey that requires both effort and practice over time. Aristotle holds that the same is true for human beings attempting to develop their virtuous character traits in attempt to live the good life. You may feel yourself coming to an Aristotelian Virtue Ethical view after reading this chapter and therefore be moved to become wittier, more courageous and more generous but you cannot simply acquire these traits by decision; rather, you must live these traits in order to develop them.

Cultivating a virtuous character is something that happens by practice. Aristotle compares the development of the skill of virtue to the development of other skills. He says that “...men become builders by building” and “...we become just by doing just acts”.<sup>7</sup> We might know that a brick must go into a particular place but we are good builders only when we know how to place that brick properly. Building requires practical skill and not merely intellectual knowledge and the same applies to developing virtuous character

traits. Ethical characters are developed by practical learning and habitual action and not merely by intellectual teaching.

In the end, the virtuous individual will become comfortable in responding to feelings/situations virtuously just as the good builder becomes comfortable responding to the sight of various tools and a set of plans. A skilled builder will not need abstract reflection when it comes to knowing how to build a wall properly, and nor will a skilled cyclist need abstract reflection on how to balance his speed correctly as he goes around a corner.

Analogously, a person skilled in the virtues will not need abstract reflection when faced with a situation in which friendliness and generosity are possibilities; they will simply know on a more intuitive level how to act. This is not to say that builders, cyclists and virtuous people will not sometimes need to reflect specifically on what to do in abnormal or difficult situations (e.g. moral dilemmas, in the case of ethics) but in normal situations appropriate responses will be natural for those who are properly skilled.

It is the need to become skilled when developing virtuous character traits that leads Aristotle to suggest that becoming virtuous will require a lifetime of work. Putting up a single bookshelf does not make you a skilled builder any more than a single act of courage makes you a courageous and virtuous person. It is the repetition of skill that determines your status and the development of virtuous characters requires a lifetime of work rather than a single week at a Virtue Ethics Boot Camp.

## 6. PRACTICAL WISDOM (PHRONESIS)

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Aristotle does offer some specifics regarding how exactly we might, to use a depressingly modern phrase, “upskill” in order to become more virtuous. Aristotle suggests that the aim of an action will be made clear by the relevant virtuous characteristic as revealed by the Golden Mean; for example, our aim in a situation may be to respond courageously or generously. It is by developing our skill of

practical wisdom (translation of “phronesis”) that we become better at ascertaining what exactly courage or generosity amounts to in a specific situation and how exactly we might achieve it.

By developing the skill of practical wisdom, we can properly put our virtuous character traits into practice. For the Aristotelian, practical wisdom may actually be the most important virtuous disposition or character trait to develop as without the skill of practical wisdom it may be difficult to actually practice actions that are witty rather than boorish, or courageous rather than cowardly. Imagine trying to be a philosopher without an acute sense of logical reasoning; you would struggle because this seems to be a foundational good on which other philosophical skills rely. So too it may be with the virtues, practical wisdom supports our instinctive knowledge of how to respond virtuously to various feelings, emotions and situations.

If this still seems to be somewhat opaque, then we may develop our sense of practical wisdom by looking at the actions of others who we do take to be virtuous. A child, for example, will most certainly need to learn how to be virtuous by following examples of others. If we are unsure in our own ability to discern what a courageous response in a given situation is, then we may be guided by the behavior of Socrates, Jesus, [Gandhi](#), Mandela or King, as examples. If we learn from the wisdom and virtue of others, then just as a building apprentice learns from a master so too virtue apprentices can learn from those more skilled than they in practicing virtue. Hopefully, such virtue apprentices will eventually reach a point where they can stand on their own two feet, with their personally developed sense of practical wisdom.

## 7. VOLUNTARY ACTIONS, INVOLUNTARY ACTIONS AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Despite the focus on agents and not actions, Aristotle does have something to contribute when it comes to discussions of potential

moral responsibility as associated with particular actions. We can separate actions into two obvious categories:

1. Voluntary actions
2. Involuntary actions

Very broadly, an action is voluntary when it is freely chosen and involuntary when it is not — these terms are more precisely defined next, in line with Aristotle's ideas. These distinctions matter in ethics because a person might be held to be morally responsible for their voluntary actions but not for their involuntary actions. According to Aristotle, an action is voluntary unless it is affected by force or ignorance, as understood in the following ways.

### Physical Force

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Imagine that Reuben is driving his car on his way home from work. Out of the blue, his passenger grabs his hand and forces him to turn the steering wheel, sending the car into oncoming traffic. Without this physical force, Reuben would not have turned the wheel and he very much regrets the damage that is caused. According to Aristotle, Reuben's action is involuntary because of this external physical force and so he is not morally responsible for the crash.

### Psychological Force

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Think of David, working at a bank when a group of thieves break in armed with guns. David is told that if he does not open the safe then he will be killed. Under this extreme psychological pressure, Aristotle would accept that David's opening of the safe is involuntary, because David would not have opened the safe otherwise and he very much regrets doing so. On this basis, David is not morally responsible in any way for the theft.

In addition to force, ignorance of a certain type can also support an action being labelled as involuntary.

### Action from Ignorance

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Rhys, a talented musician, wishes to perform a surprise concert for a friend and has been practicing songs from the Barry Manilow back catalogue for weeks. However, in the days before the surprise concert his friend, unbeknown to Rhys, develops an intense and very personal dislike for Manilow. Thus, when Rhys takes to the stage and blasts out his rendition of the classic tune “Copacabana” his friend storms off in much distress. In this situation, Aristotle would accept that Rhys acted involuntarily when causing offence because he was unaware of the changed circumstances; he acted from ignorance when performing the song rather than from malice. Without this epistemic (or knowledge-related) barrier, Rhys would not have acted as he did and he very much regrets the distress caused. For these reasons, Rhys bears no moral responsibility for the upset resulting from his song choice.

Crucially, Aristotle does not allow that all action that involves ignorance can be classed as involuntary, thereby blocking associated claims of moral responsibility.

### Action in Ignorance

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Laurence has had too much to drink and chooses to climb a traffic light with a traffic cone on his head. Laurence’s alcohol consumption has made him ignorant, at least temporarily, of the consequences of this action in terms of social relationships, employment and police action. However, for Aristotle this would not mean that his action was involuntary because Laurence acts in ignorance rather than from ignorance due to an external epistemic (or knowledge-based) barrier. Laurence does not, therefore, escape moral responsibility as a result of his self-created ignorance.



Finally, Aristotle also identifies a third form of action — non-voluntary action — that is also related to ignorant action.

### Action from Ignorance with No Regret

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Return to the case of Rhys and his Manilow performance but remove any sense of regret on Rhys' part for the distress caused. If, at the moment that the epistemic gap is bridged and Rhys learns of his friend's newly acquired musical views, he feels no regret for his action, then Aristotle would class it as a non-voluntary rather than involuntary action. The action cannot be voluntary as Rhys acted from ignorance, but it is not obviously involuntary as, without a sense of regret, it may have been that Rhys would have performed the action even if he knew what was going to happen.

The detail above is important and your own examples will help your understanding and explanations. The summary, however, is refreshingly simple. If an action is voluntary, then it is completed free from force and ignorance and we can hold the actor morally responsible. However, if the action is involuntary then the actor is not morally responsible as they act on the basis of force or from ignorance.

## 8. OBJECTION: UNCLEAR GUIDANCE

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Consider yourself caught in the middle of a moral dilemma. Wanting to know what to do you may consult the guidance offered by Utilitarianism or Kantian Ethics and discover that various specific actions you could undertake are morally right or morally wrong. Moving to seek the advice of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, you may find cold comfort from suggestions that you act generously, patiently and modestly whilst avoiding self-serving flattery and envy. Rather than knowing how to live in general, you may seek knowledge of what to actually do in this case. Virtue Ethics may therefore be

accused of being a theory, not of helpful moral guidance, but of unhelpful and non-specific moral platitudes.

In response, the virtue ethicist may remind us that we can learn how to act from considering how truly virtuous people might respond in this situation, but this response raises its own worry — how can we identify who is virtuous, or apply their actions to a potentially novel situation? Although a defender of Virtue Ethics, Rosalind Hursthouse (1943–) gives a voice to this common objection, putting forward the worry directly by saying that “Virtue Ethics does not, because it cannot, tell us what we should do... It gives us no guidance whatsoever. Who are the virtuous agents [that we should look to for guidance]?”<sup>8</sup> If all the virtue ethicist can offer to a person wondering how to act — perhaps wondering whether or not to report a friend to the police, or whether or not to change careers to work in the charity sector — is “look to the moral exemplars of Socrates and Gandhi and how they would act in this situation”, then we might well sympathize with the objector since very often our moral dilemmas are new situations, not merely old ones repeated. Asking “what would Jesus do”, if we deem Jesus to be a morally virtuous role model, might not seem very helpful for an MP trying to determine whether or not to vote for an increase in subsidies for renewable energy technologies at huge expense, and potential financial risk, to the tax-payer (to take a deliberately specific example).

Despite her statement of the objection, Hursthouse thinks that this is an unfair characterization of Virtue Ethics. Hursthouse suggests that Virtue Ethics provides guidance in the form of “v-rules”. These are guiding rules of the form “do what is honest” or “avoid what is envious”.<sup>9</sup> These rules may not be specific, but they do stand as guidance across lots of different moral situations. Whether or not you believe that this level of guidance is suitable for a normative moral theory is a judgment that you should make yourself and then defend.

## 9. OBJECTION: CLASHING VIRTUES

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Related to the general objection from lack of guidance, a developed objection may question how we are supposed to cope with situations in which virtues seem to clash. Courageous behavior may, in certain cases, mean a lack of friendliness; generosity may threaten modesty. In these situations, the suggestion to “be virtuous” may again seem to be unhelpfully vague.

To this particular objection, the Aristotelian virtue ethicist can invoke the concept of practical wisdom and suggest that the skilled and virtuous person will appropriately respond to complex moral situations. A Formula One car, for example, will be good when it has both raw speed and delicate handling and it is up to the skilled engineer to steer a path between these two virtues. So too a person with practical wisdom can steer a path between apparently clashing virtues in any given situation. Virtue ethicists have no interest in the creation of a codified moral rule book covering all situations and instead put the onus on the skill of the virtuous person when deciding how to act. Again, whether this is a strength or weakness is for you to decide and defend.

## 10. OBJECTION: CIRCULARITY

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An entirely different objection to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is based on a concern regarding logical circularity. According to Aristotle, the following statements seem to be correct:

1. An act is virtuous if it is an act that a virtuous person would commit in that circumstance.
2. A person is virtuous when they act in virtuous ways.

This, however, looks to be circular reasoning. If virtuous actions are understood in terms of virtuous people, but virtuous people are

understood in terms of virtuous actions, then we have unhelpfully circular reasoning.

Julia Annas (1946–) responds to this apparent problem by arguing that there is nothing dangerously circular in this reasoning because it is simply a reflection of how we learn to develop our virtuous dispositions.<sup>10</sup> Annas suggests the analogy of piano-playing:

1. Great piano playing is what great pianists do.
2. A pianist is great when he “does” great piano playing.

In this case, there does not seem to be any troubling circularity in reasoning. It is not the case that whatever a great pianist plays will be great, but rather that great pianists have the skills to make great music. So too it is with virtues, for virtuous people are not virtuous just because of their actual actions but because of who they are and how their actions are motivated. It is their skills and character traits that mean that, in practice, they provide a clear guide as to which actions are properly aligned with virtues. Thus, if we wish to decide whether or not an act is virtuous we can assess what a virtuous person would do in that circumstance, but this does not mean that what is virtuous is determined by the actions of a specifically virtuous individual. The issue is whether or not a person, with virtuous characteristics in the abstract, would actually carry that action out. Virtuous people are living and breathing concrete guides, helping us to understand the actions associated with abstract virtuous character dispositions.

## 11. OBJECTION: CONTRIBUTION TO EUDAIMONIA

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The final distinct objection to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics considered in this chapter stems from the Aristotelian claim that living virtuously will contribute to our ability to secure a eudaimon life. A challenge to this view may be based on the fact that certain

dispositions may seem to be virtuous but may not actually seem to contribute to our flourishing or securing the good life.

As an example of this possible objection in practice, consider the following. Shelley is often described as generous to a fault and regularly dedicates large amounts of her time to helping others to solve problems at considerable cost, in terms of both time and effort, to herself. Working beyond the limits that can reasonably be expected of her, we may wish to describe Shelley as virtuous given her generous personality. However, by working herself so hard for others, we may wonder if Shelley is unduly limiting her own ability to flourish.

Responses to this initial statement of the objection are not hard to imagine. We may say that Shelley has either succumbed to a vice of excess and is profligate with her time rather than generous, or we may accept that she is generous rather than profligate and accept the uncomfortable conclusion and say that this virtuous character trait is helping her to flourish. This second claim may seem more plausible if we ruled out a description of Shelley wasting her time.

Still, this objection may stand up if you can envisage a situation in which someone could be properly described as rash rather than courageous or wasteful rather than generous and, because of these traits, actually be contributing to their own flourishing. You should consider your own possible cases if you seek to support this general objection.

## 12. MORAL GOOD AND INDIVIDUAL GOOD

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For Aristotle, moral goodness and individual goodness may seem to be intimately linked. After all, a virtuous person will be charitable and friendly etc. and as a result of these characteristics and dispositions will both advance their own journey towards eudaimonia and make life better for others. Hedonism (which claims that pleasure is the only source of well-being), as a rival

theory attempting to outline what is required for well-being, might be thought to fail because it downplays the importance of acting in accordance with reason, so hedonists do not therefore live according to their telos or true function.

Aristotle says of his ideally virtuous person that they will have a unified psychology — that their rational and non-rational psychologies will speak with one voice. On the contrary, the non-virtuous person will have a psychology in conflict between their rational and non-rational elements. In considering who has the better life from their own individual perspectives — the happy Hedonist or the Aristotelian virtuous person — you should again form your own reasoned judgment.

It is important to note, as we conclude this chapter, that Aristotle does not suggest that living a virtuous life is sufficient to guarantee a state of eudaimonia for a person. External factors such as poverty, disease or untimely death may scupper a person's advance towards eudaimonia. However, for Aristotle, being virtuous is necessary for the achievement of eudaimonia; without the development of virtues it is impossible for a person to flourish even if they avoid poverty, disease, loneliness etc.

## SUMMARY

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Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is very different in nature to the other act-centered normative moral theories considered in this book. Whether this, in itself, is a virtue or a vice is an issue for your own judgment. The lack of a codified and fixed moral rule book is something many view as a flaw, while others perceive it as the key strength of the theory. Some, meanwhile, will feel uncomfortable with Aristotle's teleological claims, differing from those who are happy to accept that there is an objectively good life that is possible for human beings. Regardless, there is little doubt that Aristotelian Virtue Ethics offers a distinct normative moral picture and that it is a theory worthy of your reflections.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Act-centered

Agent-centered

Dispositions

Eudaimonia

Phronesis

Virtue

Telos

Golden mean

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## *Virtue Ethics: Strengths & Weaknesses*

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### **The Strengths of Virtue Ethics**

Thinkers who embrace virtue ethics emphasize that the sort of person we choose to be constitutes the heart of our ethical being. If you want to behave virtuously, become a virtuous person.

Certain traits—for instance, honesty, compassion, generosity, courage—seem to be universally admired. These strengths of character are virtues. To acquire these virtues, follow the example of persons who possess them. Once acquired, these virtues may be trusted to guide our decisions about how to act, even in difficult situations. A person might think of a religious figure, virtuous relative, or even a favorite comic book superhero, and use that person as a role model for how to behave.

Virtue ethicists think that the main question in ethical reasoning should be not “How should I now act?” but “What kind of person do I want to be?” Developing virtues that we admire in others

and avoiding actions that we recognize as vicious develops our moral sensitivity: our awareness of how our actions affect others. Virtuous persons are able to empathize, to imagine themselves in another person's shoes, and to look at an issue from other people's perspectives.

Virtuous individuals are also thought to be able to draw upon willpower not possessed by those who compromise their moral principles in favor of fame, money, sex, or power.

Virtue ethics focuses more on a person's approach to living than on particular choices and actions and so has less to say about specific courses of action or public policies. Instead, this ethical approach posed broader questions such as these:

- How should I live?
- What is the good life?
- Are ethical virtue and genuine happiness compatible?
- What are proper family, civic, and cosmopolitan virtues?

Because of the broad nature of the questions posed by virtue ethics, ethicists sometimes disagree as to whether this theory actually offers an alternative to the utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethical reasoning. How does someone who follows virtue ethics determine what the virtues are without applying some yardstick such as those provided by utilitarian and deontological ethics?

Utilitarianism and deontology are hard-universalist theories, each claiming that one ethical principle is binding on all people regardless of time or place. Virtue ethics does not make this claim. Those who favor this theory may hold that certain virtues like compassion, honesty, and integrity transcend time and culture. But they do not aim to identify universal principles that can be applied in all moral situations. Instead they accept that many things described as virtues and vices are cultural and that some of our

primary ethical obligations are based on our emotional relationships and what we owe to people we care about. In the end, though, virtue ethicists will always ask themselves, “What would a good person do?” Someone employing virtue ethics will consider what action will most help her become a better person. Virtue ethics arguments will discuss ideals as the motivation for acting.

### **The Weaknesses of Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics may seem to avoid some of the apparent flaws of duty-based ethics and of utilitarianism. A person guided by virtue ethics would not be bound by strict rules or the duty to abide by a state’s legal code. Presumably, then, an individual who has cultivated a compassionate personality consistent with virtue ethics would not easily surrender a friend’s hiding place in order to avoid having to tell a lie, as would seem to be required by duty ethics. Nor would a person guided by virtue ethics be bound by the ‘tyranny of the (happy) majority’ that appears to be an aspect of utilitarianism.

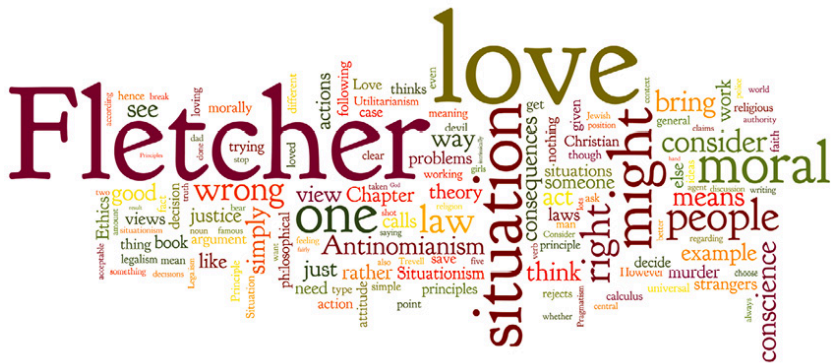
On the other hand, some thinkers argue that virtue ethics provides vague and ambiguous advice. Because of its emphasis on the imprecise and highly contextual nature of ethics, virtue ethics is often criticized as insufficient as a guide to taking specific action



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## Fletcher's Situation Ethics

## FLETCHER'S SITUATION ETHICS



People like to wallow or cower in the security of the law.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. SITUATION ETHICS INTRODUCTION

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In the introduction to *The Situation Ethics: The New Morality* Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991) develops what he calls an ethical non-system. His book caused a “fire storm” amongst the public because it legitimized the general post-war dissatisfaction with authority. At the time it was written it seemed to make some radical claims such as that it is not wrong to have extramarital sex, to be homosexual, or to have an abortion. All that said, Fletcher’s work is not widely discussed nor respected in philosophical circles. It is badly argued, idiosyncratic and rehashes old ideas.

Although there is the clothing of religion in the book — Fletcher uses religious terms such as “agápe” and cites famous theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) — the central ideas do not rely on the truth of any particular religion. As he says his argument has “...nothing special to do with theological...faith”<sup>3</sup>

Fletcher calls this ethical “non-system” Situationism and a Bible story will illustrate the general point of the book. In Mark 3:1–6 we are told that Jesus healed a man with a withered hand in the Jewish Temple; an act which we would consider to demonstrate Jesus’s love for all. However, the Pharisees tell him off because he has performed this healing on the Sabbath day and the Jewish law says that no one can work on the Sabbath.

Fletcher’s work is an attempt to show how acts can be morally acceptable even if they go against so-called moral laws (if you’ve read on Aristotle you might already have an answer to this). Fletcher says that Jesus’ act is morally acceptable — despite going against the Jewish law — because he acted to bring about the most love.

## 2. FLETCHER’S OVERALL FRAMEWORK

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Fletcher says there are two unattractive views in ethics: “Legalism”

and “Antinomianism”, and one attractive view which sits in between them: “Situationism”.

## Legalism

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Someone who is following the system of Legalism is someone who “blindly” observes moral rules without being sensitive to the situation. Fletcher has in mind a simple minded deontologist who holds that actions are right and wrong irrespective of the consequences. For example, we ought to tell the truth in all situations, even if this means that, say, millions of people die.

Various Christian sects are legalistic; for instance, some might refuse medical help — such as blood transfusions — when someone in their community is ill because they think it is against God’s commands. Or consider an example of Islamic Legalism (obviously, just as in the Christian sect, these are not wholly representative of either religion). In 2002 the religious police of Saudi Arabia refused to let a group of girls escape from a burning building because they were wearing “inappropriate” clothing, which was against the will of Allah. One witness said he saw three policemen “beating young girls to prevent them from leaving the school because they were not wearing the abaya”.<sup>4</sup> Fifteen girls died.

## Antinomianism

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The other extreme is Antinomianism (“anti” meaning against; “nominalism” meaning law). This is the view that says that an agent can do whatever he or she wants in a situation. Fletcher calls this an “existential” view because it is one that says that people are always free to choose what they want. Any supposed laws and rules limiting the actions of people are simply a way of trying to comfort them because they are scared of absolute freedom. If Antinomianism is right and if an agent believes that something is

right, then it is. Antinomianism means the moral agent is erratic and random, is unpredictable, and any decisions taken are ad hoc. There are no laws nor guiding principles, just agents and their conscience and the institutions in which they find themselves.

### A Middle Ethics: Situationism

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We might think that Legalism and Antinomianism exhaust the possibilities. If we reject moral laws then are not we forced into lawless moral anarchy? Fletcher thinks not.

Fletcher says that there is a moral law, and hence he rejects Antinomianism. But there is only one moral law, so he rejects Legalism. Fletcher's one moral law is that we ought to always act so as to bring about the most love for the most people ("Agápē Calculus"). Fletcher's Situationism is then a teleological theory. It is directed at the consequences that will determine whether an action is right or wrong.

Of course, any teleological theory will ask us to look at the details of the situation; consider where we talk about Bentham and Mill's Utilitarianism. So, Fletcher's view is not unique. What makes his view different is the centrality of "love", or as he calls it agápē.

Fletcher thinks that there can be moral principles but that these differ from laws. Principles are generalizations which are context-sensitive and which derive from the one law regarding maximizing love. For example, we might have a moral principle that we ought not to murder. This is a principle because we might think in that in general murder is wrong because it does not bring about the most love. However, it is not a law because for Fletcher, murder is not wrong in all situations. This then is similar to the discussion of Rule-Utilitarianism.

For example, a situation might arise where the child of a terrorist would have to be murdered in order to get information to stop a nuclear attack. Fletcher would say that here is a situation where we ought not to follow the principle do not murder but rather do

the most loving thing, which in this case turns out to be murder. From the universal law we can only derive principles, not other universal laws. As Fletcher puts it: “we cannot milk a universal from a universal”.<sup>5</sup>

This means that for Fletcher it might, on occasions, be morally acceptable to break the Ten Commandments. In fact, he says something stronger, that in some situations it is our duty to break these commandments. He thinks that there are four working principles of Situationism.

### 3. THE FOUR WORKING PRINCIPLES OF SITUATIONISM

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#### Principle 1. Pragmatism

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The situationalist follows a strategy which is pragmatic. What does that mean? Well it does not mean that Fletcher is a pragmatist. “Pragmatism” is a very specific and well worked-out philosophical position adopted by the likes of John Dewey (1859–1952), Charles Peirce (1839–1914) and William James (1842–1910). Fletcher does not want his theory associated with these views and rejects all the implications of this type of “Pragmatism”.

What makes his view pragmatic is very simple. It is just his attraction to moral views which do not try to work out what to do in the abstract (e.g. Kant’s Categorical Imperative, but rather explores how moral views might play out in each real life situations.

#### Principle 2: Relativism

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Even with his rejection of Antinomianism and his acceptance of one supreme principle of morality, Fletcher, surprisingly, still calls himself a relativist. This does not mean he is a relativist in the sense that we can simply choose what is right and wrong rather it is just an appeal for people to stop trying to “lay down the law”



for all people in all contexts. If situations vary then consequences vary and what we ought to do will change accordingly. This is a very simple, unsophisticated idea, like his ideas on pragmatism, and Fletcher just means that what is right or wrong is related to the situation we are in.

### Principle 3: Positivism

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His use of “positivism” is not the philosophical idea with the same name but rather is where:

Any moral or value judgment in ethics, like a theologian's faith propositions, is a decision — not a conclusion. It is a choice, not a result reached by force of logic...<sup>6</sup>

So when challenged as to how he can justify that the only law is to maximize love, Fletcher will say that he cannot. It is not a result of logic or reasoning, rather it is a decision we take, it is like the “theologian's faith”.

### Principle 4: Personalism

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Love is something that is experienced by people. So Personalism is the view that if we are to maximize love we need to consider the person in a situation — the “who” of a situation. Summing up this Fletcher says:

Love is of people, by people, and for people. Things are to be used; people are to be loved... Loving actions are the only conduct permissible.<sup>7</sup>

These then are his “four working principles”: pragmatism, relativism, positivism and personalism.

## 4. HOW TO WORK OUT WHAT TO DO: CONSCIENCE AS A VERB NOT A NOUN

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For Fletcher “conscience” plays a role in working out what to do.

He says “conscience” is a verb and not a noun. This sounds complicated but it really is not.

First consider what he means when he says conscience “is not a noun”. Conscience is not the name of an internal faculty nor is it a sort of internal “moral compass”. This is how people typically think of conscience and it is often portrayed in cartoons with a devil and angel sitting on someone’s shoulder whispering into her ears.

Rather for Fletcher conscience is a verb. Imagine we have heard some bullies laughing because they have sent our friend some offensive texts and we are trying to decide whether or not to check his phone to delete the texts before he does. The old “noun” view of conscience would get us to think about this in the abstract, perhaps reason about it, or ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, a guardian angel etc.

According to Fletcher this is wrong. Instead, we need to be in the situation, and experience the situation, we need to be doing (hence “verb”) the experiencing. Maybe, we might conclude that it is right to go into our friend’s phone, maybe we will not but whatever happens the outcome could not have been known beforehand. What our conscience would have us do is revealed when we live in the world and not through armchair reflection.

## 5. THE SIX PROPOSITIONS OF SITUATION ETHICS

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Fletcher gives six propositions (features) of his theory.

### **1: Only one ‘thing’ is intrinsically good; namely, love, nothing else at all**

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There is one thing which is intrinsically good, that is good irrespective of context, namely love. If love is what is good, then an action is right or wrong in as far as it brings about the most amount of love. Echoing Bentham’s Hedonic Calculus, Fletcher defends what he calls the:

agapeic calculus, the greatest amount of neighbor welfare for the largest number of neighbors possible.<sup>8</sup>

Notice that here he talks about “welfare” rather than “love”. Fletcher does this because of how he understands love which, importantly, is not about having feelings and desires. We discuss this below.

## 2: The ruling norm of Christian decision is love, nothing else

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As we have seen in the first proposition, the only way to decide what we ought to do (the ruling norm) is to bring about love. We need to be careful though because for Fletcher “love” has a technical meaning.

By love Fletcher means “agápē” — from ancient Greek. Agápē has a very particular meaning. Initially it is easier to see what it is not. It is not the feeling we might have towards friends or family member which is better described as brotherly love (philēō). Nor is it the erotic desire we might feel towards others (érōs).

Rather agápē is an attitude and not a feeling at all, one which does not expect anything in return and does not give any special considerations to anyone. Agápē regards the enemy in the same way as the friend, brother, spouse, lover. Given our modern context and how people typically talk of “love” it is probably unhelpful to even call it “love”.

Typically people write and think about love as experiencing an intense feeling. In cartoons when a character is in love their hearts jump out of their chest, or people “in love” are portrayed as not being able to concentrate on things because they “cannot stop thinking” about someone.

This is not what love means for Fletcher. In the Christian context agápē is the type of love which is manifest in how God relates to us. Consider Christ’s love in saying that he forgave those carrying out his execution or consider a more modern example. In February 1993, Mrs Johnson’s son, Laramiun Byrd, 20, was shot in the head

by 16-year-old Oshea Israel after an argument at a party in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mrs Johnson subsequently forgave her son's killer and after he had served a 17 year sentence for the crime, asked him to move in next door to her. She was not condoning his actions, nor will she ever forget the horror of those actions, but she does love her son's killer. That love is *agápē*.

### **3: Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else**

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For Fletcher, practically all moral problems we encounter can be boiled down to an apparent tension between “justice” on the one hand and “love” on the other. Consider a recent story:

Trevell Coleman, better known as the rapper G Dep, was a rising star on the New York hip-hop scene and had been signed to P Diddy's Bad Boy record label. He also had a wife, Crystal, and twin boys.

Yet Trevell, who was brought up a Catholic and always retained his faith, had a terrible secret, as an 18-year-old, he had mugged and shot a man. He never knew what happened to his victim, yet 17 years later, in 2010, he could no longer bear the guilt and went to the police — a step almost unimaginable for someone from the Hip Hop world.

A police search of their cold case files revealed the case of John Henkel — shot and killed in 1993 at exactly the same street corner in Harlem where Trevell says he committed his crime. He is now serving a jail sentence of 15 years to life for Henkel's murder. Yet he has no regrets; “I wanted to get right with God”, he says.

Trevell's choice was perhaps hardest to bear for his wife Crystal, who now has to bring up their teenage boys on her own.

This could be expressed as a supposed tension between “love” of family and doing the right thing — “justice”. Fletcher thinks that most other moral problems can be thought of in this way. Imagine we are trying to decide what is the best way to distribute food

given to a charity, or how a triage nurse might work in a war zone. In these cases we might put the problem like this. We want to distribute fairly, but how should we do this?

Fletcher says the answer is simple. To act justly or fairly is precisely to act in love. "Love is justice, justice is love".<sup>9</sup>

#### **4: Love wills the neighbor's good when we like him or not**

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This is self-explanatory. As we noted above, *agápē* is in the business of loving the unlovable. So related to our enemies:

Christian love does not ask us to lose or abandon our sense of good and evil, or even of superior and inferior; it simply insists that however we rate them, and whether we like them nor not, they are our neighbors and are to be loved.<sup>10</sup>

#### **5: Only the ends justify the means, nothing else**

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In direct rejection of the deontological approaches Fletcher says that any action we take, as considered as an action independent of its consequences is literally, "meaningless and pointless". An action, such as telling the truth, only acquires its status as a means by virtue of an end beyond itself.

#### **6: Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively**

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Ethical decisions are not cut and dried most of the time and they exist in a grey area. No decision can be taken before considering the situation. Fletcher gives the example of a woman in Arizona who learned that she might "bear a defective baby because she had taken thalidomide". What should she do? The loving decision was not one given by the law which stated that all abortions are wrong. However, she traveled to Sweden where she had an abortion. Even if the embryo had not been defective according to Fletcher her actions were "brave and responsible and right" because she was

acting in light of the particulars of the situation so as to bring about the most love.

## 6. PROBLEMS WITH FLETCHER'S SITUATIONISM

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Fletcher's Situationism is a hopelessly confused and confusing moral theory. Fletcher's work has the annoying tendency to present trivially true claims as if they are profound philosophical insights.

At the most general level, Fletcher commits the fallacy of appealing to authority. This is simply the mistake of thinking that an argument is strengthened by saying that someone else — normally someone in "authority", holds it.

Fletcher uses many quotations from famous theologians and mentions famous philosophers, such as Aristotle, as a substitute for argument. Unfortunately simply appealing to others is not an argument. To see how useless this approach is consider the following: "Walker's crisps are healthy because Gary Lineker says so".

The other concern throughout Fletcher's work is that he is simply unclear and inaccurate, especially when dealing with the two central ideas: "love" and "situation".

In some places he talks about love being an "attitude". In other places he says it is what we ought to bring about as an end point. Which is it? Is it a loving "attitude" in virtue of which we act? Or is it about bringing about certain consequences?

To see why this might be problematic, consider a case where we act out of the attitude of *agápē* but the consequence is one of great death and destruction. Suppose we act in good "conscience" as Fletcher calls it but our act brings about horrendously dire consequences. According to Fletcher have we done right or wrong? It is not clear.

If he does say that what we did is "wrong" then fine, *agápē* should not be thought of as an attitude, but rather some feature of consequences. This reading is of course in line with his *agápē*

calculus. Ok, so then imagine the devil acting out of hatred and malice but — due to his lack of knowledge — happens to bring about a vast amount of love in the world. Has the devil acted in the morally right way? If the “agápē calculus” is used then “yes”. So, according to Fletcher has the devil done the right thing? It is not clear.

Notice it is no good saying “well we cannot decide because it depends on the situation!” Because we have just given you the details of the situation. If you need more information, just make some up and then re-frame the question. So what Fletcher means by “love” is not clear. Nor is what he means by “situation”.

If you were writing a book on Situationism you would expect a clear and extended discussion of these concepts. However, there is no discussion of it in his key text and this is an important omission. To see how thorny the issue actually is consider the following. A politician stands up and says “given the current situation we need to raise taxes”. Our first response is probably going to be “what situation?” The point, simply put, is that there is no obvious way of knowing what is meant by “situation”. What we will choose to consider in any situation will depend on what is motivating us, what our dispositions are, what agendas we have.

Consider a moral example. A terminally ill patient wants to die; given the situation what ought we to do? The point is what does, and does not, get considered in “the situation”, will be dependent on what we already think is important. Do we consider his religious views, the fact that he has three cats which depend on him? What about the type of illness, the type of death, who he leaves behind, the effect it might have on the judicial system, the effect on the medical profession etc.

So then, as a way of actually working out what we ought to do, Fletcher’s prescription that we should “ask what will bring about the most love in the situation” is singularly unhelpful. It seems perfectly plausible that one person might see the situation in one way and someone else see it in another, and hence we get two different

claims about what we ought to do. You might think this is OK, on Fletcher's account. But recall he rejects Antinomianism (Relativism).

It is in fact quite easy to generate lots and lots of worries about Fletcher's account. This is because his theory is based on a very crude form of Utilitarianism. Have a look where we suggest some problems and simply replace "happiness" with *agápē*. Here is one example.

Utilitarianism is accused of being counter intuitive. If we could only save our dad or five strangers from drowning, the utilitarian would argue we should save the strangers because five lots of happiness is better than one. But is not it admirable and understandable to save a loved one over strangers?

The situationalist will have exactly the same problem. We might imagine that saving five strangers would bring about more "love" than saving your dad. In which case we ought to save the strangers over your dad. But is not it admirable and understandable to save a loved one over strangers?

You can simply repeat this substitution for most of the problems we cited regarding Utilitarianism, e.g. it being "too demanding" and hence generate a whole host of problems for Fletcher.

We leave you with the following quotation from Graham Dunstan writing in the *Guardian*, regarding Fletcher's book:

It is possible, though not easy, to forgive Professor Fletcher for writing his book, for he is a generous and lovable man. It is harder to forgive the SCM Press for publishing it.

## SUMMARY

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Fletcher's Situational Ethics gained a popular following as it allowed the religious believer to fit their views into the rapidly changing and nuanced moral and political landscape of the 1960s. Fletcher's position has a central commitment to God's love — *agápē*. It is this central focus on *agápē* as the moral guide for behavior that allows Fletcher to claim that an action might be right in one context, but



wrong in a different context — depending on the level of agápē brought about. In fact, Fletcher thinks that sometimes what might be morally required of us is to break the Ten Commandments.

Despite how popular the theory was it is not philosophically sophisticated, and we soon run into problems in trying to understand it. His position is worth studying though (not just because it is on the curriculum!) because it opens up the conceptual possibility that a committed Christian/Jew/Muslim etc. may consider the answers to moral questions to depend on the diverse situations we find ourselves in.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Agápē

Agápē calculus

Eros

Legalism

Pragmatic

Conscience

Consequentialism

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1 K. E. Kirk, *Conscience and its Problems*, p. 331.

2 J. F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

4 'Saudi Police "Stopped" Fire Rescue', BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1874471.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1874471.stm)

5 J. F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 27.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

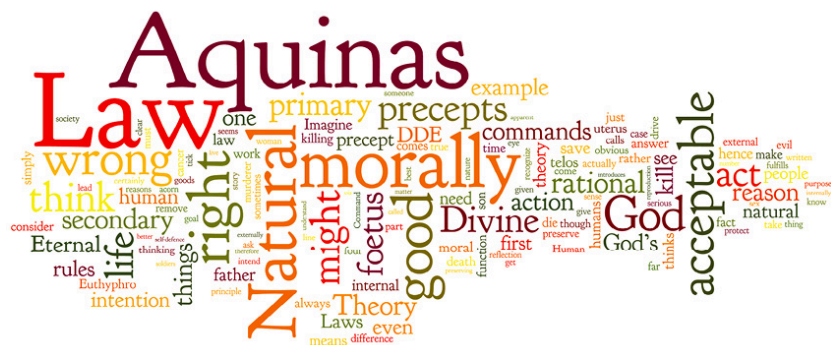
9 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 107.



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## AQUINAS'S NATURAL LAW THEORY



They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO AQUINAS

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Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was an intellectual and religious revolutionary, living at a time of great philosophical, theological and scientific development. He was a member of the Dominican Friars, which at that time was considered to be a cult, and was taught by one of the greatest intellects of the age, Albert the Great (1208–1280). In a nutshell Aquinas wanted to move away from Plato's thinking, which was hugely influential at the time, and instead introduce Aristotelian ideas to science, nature and theology.

Aquinas wrote an incredible amount—in fact one of the miracles accredited to him was the amount he wrote! His most famous work is *Summa Theologica* and this runs to some three and half thousand pages and contains many fascinating and profound insights, such as proofs for God's existence. The book remained a fundamental basis for Catholic thinking right up to the 1960s! But do not worry we will only be focusing on a few key ideas! Specifically books I–II, questions 93–95.

## 2. MOTIVATING NATURAL LAW THEORY: THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA AND DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

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The likely answer from a religious person as to why we should not steal, or commit adultery is: “because God forbids us”; or if we ask why we should love our neighbor or give money to charity then the answer is likely to be “because God commands it”. Drawing this link between what is right and wrong and what God commands and forbids is what is called the Divine Command Theory (DCT).

There is a powerful and influential challenge to such an account called the Euthyphro dilemma after the challenge was first raised in Plato's *Euthyphro*. The dilemma runs as follows:

Either God commands something is right because it is, or it is right because God commands it. If God commands something

because it is right, then God's commands do not make it right, His commands only tell us what is right. This means God simply drops out of the picture in terms of explaining why something is right.

If on the other hand something is right because God commands it then anything at all could be right; killing children or setting fire to churches could be morally acceptable. But if a moral theory says this then that looks as if the theory is wrong.

Most theists reject the first option and opt for this second option — that God's commands make something right. But they then have to face the problem that it make morality haphazard. This "arbitrariness problem" as it is sometimes called, is the reason that many, including Aquinas, give up on the Divine Command Theory.

So for Aquinas what role, if any at all, does God have when it comes to morality? For him, God's commands are there to help us to come to see what, as a matter of fact, is right and wrong rather than determine what is right and wrong. That is, Aquinas opts for the first option in the Euthyphro dilemma as stated above. But then this raises the obvious question: if it is not God's commands that make something right and wrong, then what does? Does not God just fall out of the picture? This is where his Natural Law Theory comes in.

### 3. NATURAL LAW THEORY

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Aquinas's Natural Law Theory contains four different types of law: Eternal Law, Natural Law, Human Law and Divine Law. The way to understand these four laws and how they relate to one another is via the Eternal Law, so we'd better start there...

By "Eternal Law" Aquinas means God's rational purpose and plan for all things. And because the Eternal Law is part of God's mind then it has always, and will always, exist. The Eternal Law is not simply something that God decided at some point to write.

Aquinas thinks that everything has a purpose and follows a plan.

He, like Aristotle, is a teleologist (the Greek term “telos” refers to what we might call a purpose, goal, end/or the true final function of an object and believes that every object has a telos; the acorn has the telos of growing into an oak; the eye a telos of seeing; a rat of eating and reproducing etc. If something fulfills its purpose/plan then it is following the Eternal Law.

Aquinas thinks that something is good in as far as it fulfils its purpose/plan. This fits with common sense. A “good” eye is one which sees well, an acorn is a good if it grows into a strong oak tree.

But what about humans? Just as a good eye is to see, and a good acorn is to grow then a good human is to...? Is to what? How are we going to finish this sentence? What do you think?

Aquinas thinks that the answer is reason and that it is this that makes us distinct from rats and rocks. What is right for me and you as humans is to act according to reason. If we act according to reason then we are partaking in the Natural Law.

If we all act according to reason, then we will all agree to some overarching general rules (what Aquinas calls primary precepts). These are absolute and binding on all rational agents and because of this Aquinas rejects relativism.

The first primary precept is that good is to be pursued and done and evil avoided. He thinks that this is the guiding principle for all our decision making.

Before unpacking this, it is worth clarifying something about what “law” means. Imagine that we are playing Cluedo and we are trying to work out the identity of the murderer. There are certain rules about how to move around the board, how to deal out cards, how to reveal the murderer etc. These rules are all written down and can be consulted.

However, in playing the game there are other rules that operate which are so obvious that they are neither written down nor spoken. One such rule is that a claim made in the game cannot both be true and false; if it is Professor Plum who is the murderer then it cannot be true that it is not Professor Plum who is the

murderer. These are internal rules which any rational person can come to recognize by simply thinking and are not external like the other rules — such as you can only have one guess as to the identity of the murderer. When Aquinas talks of Natural Laws, he means internal rules and not external ones.

Natural Law does not generate an external set of rules that are written down for us to consult but rather it generates general rules that any rational agent can come to recognize simply in virtue of being rational. For example, for Aquinas it is not as if we need to check whether we should pursue good and avoid evil, as it is just part of how we already think about things. Aquinas gives some more examples of primary precepts:

1. Protect and preserve human life.
2. Reproduce and educate one's offspring.
3. Know and worship God.
4. Live in a society.

These precepts are primary because they are true for all people in all instances and are consistent with Natural Law.

Aquinas also introduces what he calls the Human Law which gives rise to what he calls "Secondary Precepts". These might include such things as do not drive above 70 mph on a motorway, do not kidnap people, always wear a helmet when riding a bike, do not hack into someone's bank account. Secondary precepts are not generated by our reason but rather they are imposed by governments, groups, clubs, societies etc.

It is not always morally acceptable to follow secondary precepts. It is only morally acceptable if they are consistent with the Natural Law. If they are, then we ought to follow them, if they are not, then we ought not. To see why think through an example.

Consider the secondary precept that "if you are a woman and you live in Saudi Arabia then you are not allowed to drive". Aquinas would argue that this secondary precept is practically irrational

because it treats people differently based on an arbitrary difference (gender). He would reason that if the men in power in Saudi actually really thought hard then they too would recognize that this law is morally wrong. This in turn means that Aquinas would think that this human law does not fit with the Natural Law. Hence, it is morally wrong to follow a law that says that men can, and women cannot, drive. So although it is presented as a secondary precept, because it is not in accordance with Natural Law, it is what Aquinas calls an apparent good. This is in contrast with those secondary precepts which are in accordance with the Natural Law and which he calls the real goods.

Unlike primary precepts, Aquinas is not committed to there being only one set of secondary precepts for all people in all situations. It is consistent with Aquinas's thinking to have a law to drive on the right in the US and on the left in the UK as there is no practical reason to think that there is one correct side of the road on which to drive.

It is clear that on our own we are not very good at discovering primary precepts and consequently Aquinas thinks that what we ought to do is talk and interact with people. To discover our real goods — our secondary precepts which accord with Natural Law — we need to be part of a society. For example, we might think that “treat Christians as secondary citizens” is a good secondary precept until we talk and live with Christians. The more we can think and talk with others in society the better and it is for this reason that “live in society” is itself a primary precept.

But looking at what we have said already about Natural Laws and primary and secondary precepts, we might think that there is no need for God. If we can learn these primary precepts by rational reflection then God simply drops out of the story (recall the Euthyphro dilemma above).

Just to recap as there a lots of moving parts to the story. We now have Eternal Law (God's plans/purpose for all things), Natural Laws (our partaking in the Eternal Law which leads to primary precepts),



Human Laws (humans making specific laws to capture the truths of the Natural Laws which lead to secondary precepts) and now finally Aquinas introduces the Divine Law.

The Divine Law, which is discovered through revelation, should be thought of as the Divine equivalent of the Human Law (those discovered through rational reflection and created by people). Divine laws are those that God has, in His grace, seen fit to give us and are those “mysteries”, those rules given by God which we find in scripture; for example, the ten commandments. But why introduce the Divine Law at all? It certainly feels we have enough Laws. Here is a story to illustrate Aquinas’s answer.

A number of years ago I was talking to a minister of a church. He told me about an instance where a married man came to ask his advice about whether to finish an affair he was having. The man’s reasoning went as follows — “I am having an affair which just feels so right, we are both very much in love and surely God would want what is best for me! How could it be wrong if we are so happy?”

In response, the minister opened the Bible to the Ten Commandments and pointed out the commandment that it says that it is wrong to commit adultery. Case closed. The point of this story is simple. We can be confused and mistaken about what we think we have most reason to do and because of this we need someone who actually knows the mind of God to guide us, and who better to know this than God Himself. This then is precisely what is revealed in the Divine Law.

Or consider another example. We recognize that we find it hard to forgive our friends and nearly always impossible to forgive our enemies. We tell ourselves we have the right to be angry, to bear grudges, etc. Isn’t this just human? However, these human reasons are distortions of the Eternal Law. We need some guidance when it comes to forgiveness and it is where the Divine Law which tells us that we should forgive others — including our enemies. Following the Human Laws and the Divine Laws will help us to fulfill our purposes and plans and be truly happy.

#### 4. SUMMARY OF AQUINAS'S NATURAL LAW THEORY

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For Aquinas everything has a function (a *telos*) and the good thing(s) to do are those acts that fulfill that function. Some things such as acorns, and eyes, just do that naturally. However, humans are free and hence need guidance to find the right path. That right path is found through reasoning and generates the “internal” Natural Law. By following the Natural Law we participate in God’s purpose for us in the Eternal Law.

However, the primary precepts that derive from the Natural Law are quite general, such as, pursue good and shun evil. So we need to create secondary precepts which can actually guide our day-to-day behavior. But we are fallible so sometimes we get these secondary precepts wrong, sometimes we get them right. When they are wrong they only reflect our apparent goods. When they are right they reflect our real goods.

Finally, however good we are because we are finite and sinful, we can only get so far with rational reflection. We need some revealed guidance and this comes in the form of Divine Law. So to return to the Euthyphro dilemma. God’s commands through the Divine Law are ways of illuminating what is in fact morally acceptable and not what determines what is morally acceptable. Aquinas rejects the Divine Command Theory.

#### 5. PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE: THE DOCTRINE OF DOUBLE EFFECT (DDE)

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Let’s consider some examples to show that what we have said so far might actually work. Imagine someone considering suicide. Is this morally acceptable or not? Recall, it is part of the Natural Law to preserve and protect human life. Clearly suicide is not preserving and protecting human life. It is therefore irrational to kill oneself and cannot be part of God’s plan for our life; hence it is morally unacceptable.

Imagine that someone is considering having an abortion after becoming pregnant due to rape. The same reasoning is going to apply. We ought to preserve and protect human life and hence an abortion in this case is morally wrong.

However, as we will see, Aquinas thinks that there are some instances where it is morally acceptable to kill an innocent person and therefore there may be occasions when it is morally acceptable to kill a fetus. But how can this be correct? Will this not violate the primary precept about preserving life? The answer is to understand that for Aquinas, an action is not just about what we do externally but is also about what we do internally (i.e. our motivations). With this distinction he can show that, for example, killing an innocent can be morally acceptable.

To make this clear, Aquinas introduces one of his most famous ideas: the "Doctrine of Double Effect". Let's see how this works.

Imagine a child brought up in a physically, sexually and emotionally abusive family. He is frequently scared for his life and is locked in the house for days at a time. One day when his father is drunk and ready to abuse him again he quickly grabs a kitchen knife and slashes his father's artery. His father bleeds out and dies in a matter of minutes. Do you think the son did anything wrong?

Many people would say that he did nothing morally wrong and in fact, some might even go as far as to say that he should get a pat on the back for his actions. What about Aquinas? What would he say?

We might think that given the Natural Law to "preserve and protect life" he would say that this action is morally wrong. But, in fact, he would say the son's action was not morally wrong (Aquinas discusses self-defense in the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, Qu. 64)).

So why is the son killing the father not in direct contradiction with the primary precept? Aquinas asks us to consider the difference between the external act — the fact that the father was killed, and the internal act — the motive.

In our example, the action is one of self-defense because of the son's internal action and because of this, Aquinas would think

the killing is morally acceptable. This distinction and conclusion is possible because of Aquinas's Doctrine of Double Effect which states that if an act fulfills four conditions then it is morally acceptable. If not, then it is not.

1. The first principle is that the act must be a good one.
2. The second principle is that the act must come about before the consequences.
3. The third is that the intention must be good.
4. The fourth, it must be for serious reasons.

This is abstract so let's go back to our example. The act of the son was performed to save his own life so that is good — we can tick (1). Moreover, the act to save his life came about first — we can tick (2). The son did not first act to kill his father in order to save his own life. That would be doing evil to bring about good and that is never morally acceptable. The intention of the son was to preserve and protect his life, so the intention was good — tick (3). Finally, the reasons were serious as it was his life or his father's life — tick (4).

So given that the act meets all four principles, it is in line with the DDE and hence the action is morally acceptable, even though it caused someone to die and hence seems contrary to the primary precept of preserving life.

We can draw a contrasting case. Imagine that instead of slashing his father in self-defense, the son plans the killing. He works out the best time, the best day and then sets up a trip wire causing his father to fall from his flat window to his death. Does this action meet the four criteria of the DDE? Well, no, because the son's intention is to kill the father rather than save his own life — we must put a cross at (3).

We have already seen that suicide is morally impermissible for Aquinas, so does that mean that any action you take that leads knowingly to your own death is morally wrong? No. Because even though the external act of your own death is the same, the internal

act — the intention — might be different. An action is judged via the Natural Law both externally and internally.

Imagine a case where a soldier sees a grenade thrown into her barracks. Knowing that she does not have time to defuse it or throw it away, she throws herself on the grenade. It blows up, killing her but saving other soldiers in her barracks. Is this wrong or right? Aquinas says this is morally acceptable given DDE. If we judge this act both internally and externally we'll see why.

The intention — the internal act — was not to kill herself even though she could foresee that this was certainly what was going to happen. The act itself is good, to save her fellow soldiers (1). The order is right, she is not doing evil so good will happen (2). The intention is good, it is to save her fellow soldiers (3). The reason is serious, it concerns people's lives (4).

Contrast this with a soldier who decides to kill herself by blowing herself up. The intention is not good and hence the DDE does not permit this suicidal action.

Finally, imagine that a woman is pregnant and also has inoperable uterine cancer. The doctors have two choices; to take out the uterus and save the mother, but the fetus will die; or leave the fetus to develop and be born healthy, but the woman will die. What would Aquinas say in this instance? Well using the DDE he would say that it is morally acceptable to remove the cancer.

The action is to remove the cancer; it has the foreseeable consequences of the fetus dying but that is not what is intended. The action — to remove the cancer — is good (1). The act of removing the cancer comes before the death of the fetus (2). The intention to save the woman's life is also good (3). Finally, the reasons are serious as they are about the life and death of the woman and the fetus (4).

So even though this is a case where the doctor's actions bring about the death of the foetus it would be acceptable for Aquinas through his Natural Law Theory, as is shown via the DDE.

## 6. SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT NATURAL LAW THEORY

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There are many things we might consider when thinking through Aquinas's Natural Law Theory. There are some obvious problems we could raise, such as the problem about whether or not God exists. If God does not exist then the Eternal Law does not exist and therefore the whole theory comes tumbling down. However, as good philosophers we ought always to operate with a principle of charity and grant our opponent is rational and give the strongest possible interpretation of their argument. So, let's assume for the sake of argument that God exists. How plausible is Aquinas's theory? There are a number of things that we can pick up on.

Aquinas's theory works on the idea that if something is "natural", that is, if it fulfills its function, then it is morally acceptable, but there are a number of unanswered questions relating to natural.

We might ask, why does "natural" matter? We can think of things that are not "natural" but which are perfectly acceptable, and things which are natural which are not. For example, wearing clothes, taking medication and body piercing certainly are not natural, but we would not want to say such things are morally wrong.

On the other hand we might consider that violence is a natural response to an unfaithful partner, but also think that such violence is morally unacceptable. So it is not true that we can discover what is morally acceptable or not simply by discovering what is natural and what is not.

Put this worry aside. Recall, Aquinas thinks that reproduction is natural and hence reproduction is morally acceptable. This means that sex that does not lead to reproduction is morally unacceptable. Notice that Aquinas is not saying that if sex does not lead to pregnancy it is wrong. After all, sometimes the timing is not right. His claim is rather that if there is no potential for sex to lead to pregnancy then it is wrong. However, even with this qualification this would mean a whole host of things such as homosexuality and

contraception are morally wrong. We might take this as a reason to rethink Aquinas's moral framework.

There is, though, a more fundamental worry at the heart of this approach (and Aristotle's) to ethics. Namely, they think that everything has a goal (*telos*). Now, with some things this might be plausible. Things such as the eye or an acorn have a clear function — to grow, to see — but what about humans? This seems a bit less obvious! Do humans (rather than our individual parts) really have a *telos*? There are certainly some philosophers — such as the existentialists, for example Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) — who think that there is no such thing as human nature and no such thing as a human function or goal. But if we are unconvinced that humans have a goal, then this whole approach to ethics seems flawed.

Next we might raise questions about DDE. Go back to our example about abortion. For Aquinas it is morally acceptable to remove the uterus even if we know that in doing so the fetus will die. What is not morally acceptable is to intend to kill the fetus by removing the uterus. On first reading this seems to make sense; we have an intuitive feel for what DDE is getting at. However, when we consider it in more detail it is far from clear.

Imagine two doctors who (apparently) do exactly the same thing, they both remove the uterus and the fetus dies. The one intends to take out the uterus — in full knowledge that the fetus will die — the other intends to kill the fetus. For the DDE to work in the way that Aquinas understands it, this difference in intention makes the moral difference between the two doctors. However, is there really a moral difference? To put pressure on the answer that there is, ask yourself what you think it means to intend to do something. If the first doctor says "I did not intend to kill the fetus" can we make sense of this? After all, if you asked her "did you know that in taking out the uterus the fetus would die?" she would say "yes, of course". But if she did this and the fetus died, did not she intend (in some sense) to kill the fetus? So this issue raises some

complex question about the nature of the mind, and how we might understand intentions.

Finally, we might wonder how easy it is to work out what actually to do using the Natural Law. We would hope our moral theory gives us direction in living our lives. That, we might think, is precisely the role of a moral theory. But how might it work in this case?

For Aquinas, if we rationally reflect then we arrive at the right way of proceeding. If this is in line with the Natural Law and the Divine Law then it is morally acceptable. If it is out of line, then it is not. The assumption is that the more we think, the more rational we become, the more convergence there will be. We'll all start to have similar views on what is right and wrong. But is this too optimistic? Very often, even after extensive reflection and cool deliberation with friends and colleagues, it is not obvious to us what we as rational agents should do. We all know people we take to be rational, but we disagree with them on moral issues. And even in obviously rational areas such as mathematics, the best mathematicians are not able to agree. We might then be skeptical that as rational agents we will come to be in line with the Natural and Divine Laws.

## SUMMARY

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Aquinas is an intellectual giant. He wrote an incredible amount covering a vast array of topics. His influence has been immense. His central idea is that humans are created by God to reason — that is our function. Humans do the morally right thing if we act in accordance with reason, and the morally wrong thing if we don't.

Aquinas is an incredibly subtle and complex thinker. For example, his Doctrine of Double Effect makes us to reflect on what we actually mean by "actions", "intentions" and "consequences". His work remains much discussed and researched and typically still plays a central role in a Christian Ethics that rejects Divine Command Theory.



## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Apparent goods

A priori

A posteriori

Eternal Law

External acts

Natural Law

Primary precepts

Real goods

Secondary precepts

Internal acts

Doctrine of Double Effect

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1 T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, I:8,\* <https://ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.pdf>

2 T. Aquinas, *Romans*, 2:15.

\*Update to link to source was made because the original source contained a dead link.



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## **PART VI**

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# **METAETHICAL THEORIES & RELATIVISM IN ETHICS**



# *Metaethical Theories & Relativism in Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes*

## **Metaethical Theories & Relativism in Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

By the end of this learning unit, student will be able to:

- Explain the philosophical problem of relativism in ethics.
- Examine and compare major historical theories of metaethics, such as objectivism, subjectivism, and cultural relativism.
- Analyze and assess arguments for and against competing metaethical theories and theories' strengths and weaknesses.

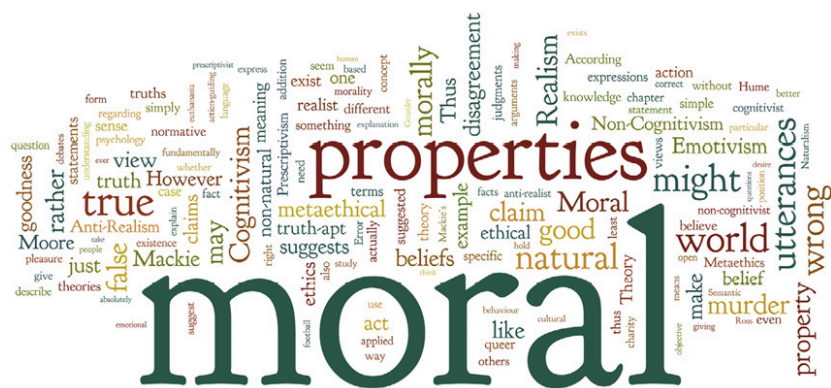


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## Part II

### METAETHICS

## METAETHICAL THEORIES



But in every case in which one would commonly be said to be

making an ethical judgment, the function of the relevant ethical word is purely 'emotive'. It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. METAETHICS: INTRODUCTION

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The prefix "meta" is derived from the Greek for "beyond". Metaethics is therefore a form of study that is beyond the topics considered in normative or applied ethics. Recall as we stated in the introduction, the differences between these forms of ethical study are helpfully captured in an analogy put forward by Fisher (2011) involving different participants in a game of football.

- Applied Ethics is the study of how we should act in specific areas of our lives; how we should deal with issues like meat-eating, euthanasia or stealing (to use examples familiar to this textbook). To use the football analogy, the applied ethicist kicks the philosophical football around just as a footballer kicks the ball on the field. A good applied ethicist might score goals and be successful by offering specific arguments that convince us to change our moral views in a particular corner of our lives.
- Normative Ethics is focused on the creation of theories that provide general moral rules governing our behavior, such as Utilitarianism or Kantian Ethics. The normative ethicist, rather than being a football player, is more like a referee who sets up the rules governing how the game is played. Peter Singer, for example, focuses on advancing applied ethical arguments within the normative framework of his Preference Utilitarianism.
- Metaethics is the study of how we engage in ethics. Thus, the metaethicist has a role more similar to a football commentator rather than to a referee or player. The metaethicist judges and comments on how the ethical

game is being played rather than advancing practical arguments, or kicking the football, themselves. For example, the metaethicist might comment on the meaning and appropriateness of ethical language, just as the football commentator might remark on the appropriateness of particular tactics or set-piece routines.

Nobody is perfect, and it is therefore possible that some of you are not avid football fans. To respect this possibility, here is a non-football based explanation of what Metaethics amounts to. Metaethical conclusions do not tell us how we should morally act or which type of decision is morally correct in any one particular circumstance. Instead, Metaethics is focused on questions regarding how ethical study — at both normative and applied levels — works. Some typical metaethical questions are:

- When we say something is “morally good”, what do we mean?
- If the claim that “euthanasia is morally wrong” is true, what makes it true?
- If moral claims are sometimes true, what methods do we use to access these moral truths?

You should not expect a metaethical argument to provide specific guidance regarding how to act, but you should expect a metaethical argument to critique the foundations of normative or applied action-guiding moral theories.

## 2. THE VALUE OF METAETHICS

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A former colleague once suggested that Metaethics was entirely and frustratingly pointless — academia for academia’s sake, she thought. There are, however, good reasons for thinking that



metaethical arguments can be just as worthy and valuable as their normative and applied counterparts.

One such factor in favor of Metaethics is as follows. If ethics is fundamentally concerned with good behavior or, as per Aristotle, good characters, then it would seem to be desirable to properly understand what exactly “good” amounts to.

Analogously, we would not consider attempting applied mathematics without first understanding what was meant by fundamental concepts like addition or subtraction. Nor would we consider attempting surgery on a person without being sure of the meanings of terms like blood, heart or liver. Understanding goodness — what it is and how we might access it — seems like a fundamental presupposition of successful ethical study, rather than a merely abstract topic of philosophical debate.

### 3. COGNITIVISM VERSUS NON-COGNITIVISM

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Key to the successful study of Metaethics is understanding the various key terminological distinctions that make up the “metaethical map”. Metaethical theories can be categorized, at least for our purposes, in respect of where they fall in the debates between Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism, and Realism and Anti-Realism. Thus, it is a prerequisite for understanding and evaluating metaethical theories that you understand these two debates. In this section, we deal with the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists.

If you are a Moral Cognitivist (the “moral” prefix is assumed from hereon) then you have a particular view about the meaning of moral terms and a particular view about the psychology behind moral utterances. The former version of Cognitivism, concerned with meaning, is captured in the discussion of Semantic Cognitivism while the latter version of Cognitivism, concerned with psychology, is captured in the discussion of Psychological Cognitivism.

Cognitivism, as discussed in the remainder of this chapter, is a combination of these two positions.

## Semantic Cognitivism

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Semantic Cognitivism (not to be confused with Realism) suggests that when we make moral claims of the form “murder is wrong” or “helping others is right” our claims can be true or false (what philosophers call truth-apt). According to the semantic cognitivist, what makes our moral statements true or false is whether or not they accurately pick out, or refer to, specifically moral aspects of the world. Thus, the semantic cognitivist views our moral language as essentially descriptive in nature; we try to describe genuinely moral features of the world and our moral claims are true when our descriptions are accurate and false when they are inaccurate.

This position really is as simple as it sounds, even though it is by no means uncontroversial. Consider a semantic cognitivist about the meaning of statements in a news report. When the reporter says that “the defendant stepped into the courthouse and gave his name and his date of birth”, then this statement will be truth-apt — it will be the kind of statement that can be described as true or false. Whether it is true or false will be determined by the accuracy of this statement as a description of features of the world; if the statement correctly refers to the features of the world identified then it will be true, if it does not then it will be false. The situation is the same for the semantic moral cognitivist, if the utterance “murder is wrong” really does pick out a moral property of wrongness associated with murder then it will be true, and false otherwise.

Crucially, keep in mind that Semantic Cognitivism only goes as far as suggesting that moral claims are truth-apt — capable of being true or false. Semantic Cognitivism, by itself, does not suggest anything about moral claims ever actually being true. To put it in another way Cognitivism has nothing to do with what actually exists

in the world (that is Realism versus Anti-Realism — see below). Instead, it is purely a theory explaining the meaning of moral statements.

### Psychological Cognitivism

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Psychological Cognitivism (not to be confused with Realism) is the view that when we utter a moral statement we give voice to a belief, rather than any other type of non-belief attitude. So, when I utter the statement “Leicester City won the Premier League in 2015–2016”, I express my belief that this happened. According to the psychological cognitivist, I also express a belief when I make claims such as “murder is wrong” or “helping others is right”.

From here, Semantic and Psychological Cognitivism will be assumed to go together to form the cognitivist position. This is reasonable because it is most natural to think of a truth-apt utterance as being the expression of a belief, for we assume that a belief is the kind of thing that can be true or false and refers to the world. In ethics then, cognitivists claim that moral statements express truth-apt beliefs that are made true or false according to how accurately they describe the world. Moral language and moral psychology, according to the cognitivist, are not especially different to the language and psychology common to many other disciplines such as science, news journalism or non-fiction history books.

You might be wondering what all the fuss is about so far; it is probably fair to say that Cognitivism is the common sense position when it comes to moral language and our associated psychology. Of course, you might think, ethical claims are truth-apt and that we express ethical beliefs, for what else could we be doing when we engage in normative or applied ethics? Richard Joyce (1966–) is of this view when it comes to Cognitivism and our moral utterances, suggesting that “...if something walks and talks like a bunch of [truth-apt, belief-state] assertions it’s highly likely that it is a bunch of [truth-apt, belief-state] assertions”.<sup>2</sup>

## Semantic Non-Cognitivism

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Semantic Non-Cognitivism might, given the plausibility of its cognitivist rival, seem to be an undesirable position. According to the semantic non-cognitivist when we utter sentences such as “murder is wrong” we are not attempting to describe any moral features of the world but we are simply expressing an attitude or feeling — perhaps disgust, or anger, in this case. Attitudes are not the types of things that can be true or false because they are not truth-apt; they do not aim at truth and do not attempt to describe or refer to any feature of the world. Consider what happens when you get frustrated with your work, for example, and exclaim “Ahhhhh!” This is an expression of an attitude, it is not something which describes the world and it is not truth apt. The semantic non-cognitivist thus argues that our moral utterances are more like “Ahhhhh!” than they are like “the defendant entered the courthouse”; they are non-descriptive, non-truth-apt expressions.

## Psychological Non-Cognitivism

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Psychological Non-Cognitivism is a view that is described by (though not defended by) Ralph Wedgwood (1964–). According to Wedgwood, psychological non-cognitivists hold that the psychology behind our non-truth-apt moral expressions is not to be understood as based on “belief”, but rather based on “...desires, preferences, emotions, intentions or the like”.<sup>3</sup>

Your cry of “Ahhhhh!” in frustration does not express a belief that your work is annoying — even though people might take you to be annoyed — but, most likely, a desire or preference for your work to be over. Such mental states are fairly common and unremarkable; it is just that they are different to belief states.

When discussing Non-Cognitivism from this point, it should be understood as a position combining both the semantic and psychological elements. According to the non-cognitivist our moral

utterances are not capable of being true or false and are expressions of attitudes/preferences/desires/emotions etc. rather than expressions of belief. Responding to a moral utterance by saying “true” or “false” would be to fail to properly comprehend the meaning of that moral statement just as it would be a mistake to respond to a cry of “Ahhhhh!” by saying “false”. The non-cognitivist thus suggests a fairly radical understanding of our common views regarding what moral utterances mean and how moral discourse works. Later, specific non-cognitivist views will be explained and evaluated and you can judge the desirability of this revision of our normal understanding for yourself.

#### 4. REALISM VERSUS ANTI-REALISM

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The second key fork in the road that separates metaethical theories is the choice between Moral Realism and Moral Anti-Realism (as with Cognitivism, the “Moral” prefix is assumed from hereon). As before, understanding these broad positions is crucial to understanding and critiquing the specific metaethical theories outlined later in this chapter.

##### Realism

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Realism is a view about what exists. It is the view that moral properties exist independently of human beings and can be located in the world. Just as an action can possess properties such as being “Salika’s action”, “a violent action”, or a “depressing action” so too it might possess the property of being a “morally wrong action”. Peter Railton (1950–) describes himself as in favor of a position that might be called “stark, raving Moral Realism” in virtue of believing that mind-independent moral truth exists in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Realism in ethics is somewhat controversial, but Realism in geography is far less controversial and might be a helpful guide to

the realist view in ethics. When a geographer speaks of the water in Lake Ontario, the “Geography realist” believes that such water exists and has various properties and qualities (temperature, depth etc.) that exist independently and objectively; the water would have a particular temperature irrespective of any human belief about that temperature. Analogously, in ethics, realists hold that certain moral properties or facts exist and that they exist objectively and independently of the minds or beliefs of individual people (or at least, realists relevant for our discussion, such as Railton, believe this). Importantly, realists thus believe in the possibility of error — believing that “murder is wrong” does not make murder wrong. What would make murder wrong would be the presence of an actual moral property of wrongness (objective and mind-independent) associated with the act of murder.

## Anti-Realism

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Anti-Realism is simply the denial of Realism. Anti-realists deny the existence of any mind-independent, objective, moral properties. The moral anti-realist is thus akin to the anti-realist about dragons or leprechauns in that they simply deny their existence.

Anti-realists tend to be (though need not be) non-cognitivists, a fact that should not be surprising given that non-cognitivists do not believe that our moral utterances aim of truth. However, the next section paints the metaethical map more specifically in respect of how Cognitivism, Non-Cognitivism, Realism and Anti-Realism might be combined to form specific metaethical theories.

## 5. THE METAETHICAL MAP

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The broad explanations of Cognitivism, Non-Cognitivism, Realism and Anti-Realism have been crucial because they allow the following categorisation of specific metaethical views to make sense. You really need to learn what these terms mean if any of the

following is going to make sense. Drawing out the metaethical map might be very helpful, to this end.

Example theories which are both cognitivist and realist

Moral Naturalism

Moral Non-Naturalism (e.g. intuitionist realist accounts)

Theories both cognitivist and anti-realist

Moral Error Theory

Theories both non-cognitivist and realist

We only know of one person holding this view: Kahane.<sup>5</sup>

Theories both non-cognitivist and anti-realist

Emotivism

Prescriptivism

The natural bedfellows between the broad positions outlined are thus Cognitivism and Realism, and Non-Cognitivism and Anti-Realism. If we aim for truth in our moral utterances, it makes sense to think that there are properties existing that we are trying to refer to and accurately describe.

However, if our moral utterances do not aim for truth then this may neatly sit with the view that no such moral properties exist (otherwise, why would we not try to describe them?).

The outlying theory is Moral Error Theory, which combines the cognitivist view that our moral utterances are expressions of truth-aptness with the view that there are no realist objective moral properties in the world. Thus, moral error theorists believe that our moral utterances are always, in every circumstance, false. This is a controversial view and is explored in more depth in sections ten and eleven.

## 6. COGNITIVIST AND REALIST THEORY ONE: NATURALISM

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Naturalists hold that there are moral properties in the world that make true at least some of our ordinary moral beliefs. Unsurprisingly, naturalists also hold that these moral properties

are perfectly natural properties rather than being non-natural. To understand this claim, we need a better grip of what the philosophical and ethical naturalist actually means by the term “natural”.

Naturalists in ethics hold that moral properties are as natural as those properties discussed and examined in the sciences, for example. So, the property of being “wet” is a perfectly natural property as is the more complex property of “being magnetic”. These properties can be investigated by scientists and are not supernatural or beyond the study of natural sciences.

Gilbert Harman (1938–) suggests that “...we must concentrate on finding the place of value and obligation [morality] in the world of facts as revealed by science”.<sup>6</sup> If murder has the property of being morally wrong, then this property is natural if it fits into the world of facts as revealed by science.

Simon Blackburn (1944–) (though not a realist himself) outlines the desirability and purpose of this commitment to Naturalism when he says that: “The problem is one of finding room for ethics, or placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part”.<sup>7</sup>

Moral Naturalism thus speaks to those who wish to defend Realism and truth in ethics, without resorting to non-natural justifications based on Gods, Platonic Forms and the like. The naturalist seeks to fit moral properties into the non-mystical world of ordinary science.

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that is underpinned by a metaethical Naturalism. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill defined moral goodness in terms of the act (or set of rules) that promoted the greatest amount of pleasure/happiness for the greatest number of people. Utilitarians thus view good as an entirely natural properties for there is nothing mystical, enchanted or supernatural about pleasure; scientists can perfectly well understand pleasure in terms of neural firings or psychological explanations.



In addition, both Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse have sought to place Virtue Ethics within a naturalist metaethical framework.

According to Hursthouse, human beings function well if they meet four particular ends — survival, reproduction, enjoyment/freedom from pain, and possession of an appropriate functional role within a group. As rational beings, we can determine the character traits and dispositions that can help us to meet these aims and such character traits and dispositions will then be virtuous. Virtue Ethics, thus defined, would therefore be a normative theory based on Naturalism because what makes something good or virtuous is entirely determined by natural factors to do with our psychology, behavior, biology and social dynamics. As with Utilitarianism, no mystical or supernatural stuff is required to explain the virtues and associated moral goodness.

Does Naturalism lead to Relativism? Harman claimed that, if correct, Naturalism would naturally lead us to Moral Relativism and away from Moral Absolutism. Harman suggests that if ethical guidelines and rules were absolute in nature then they would need to apply irrespective of contingent situations or contingent lifestyles; murder, for example, would be wrong irrespective of any specific situational factors if the claim that “murder is wrong” were absolutely true. However, if moral properties are natural properties, then Relativism may make more sense in virtue of the fact that natural properties can vary in presence from case to case.

For example, it is not absolutely true that “London is north of Paris” because at some point continental plates will shift and these cities could move in relative location to each other. Nor is it absolutely true that “sections of the Australian coast have coral reefs”, since human activity and climate change might change this natural fact. Equally then, if a natural property is what makes true the claim that “murder is wrong” then this natural property might seem to depend upon the amount of pleasure produced, or else on some other changeable natural factor. If moral properties are

natural properties, then actions might not be absolutely wrong but might instead be wrong relative to the changeable presence of those natural properties.

Michael Smith (1954–) rejects Harman's claim and suggests that Naturalism is, in and of itself, irrelevant to the debate between moral relativists and moral absolutists. Smith argues that absolutists and relativists will differ on questions regarding the rationality or reasonableness of human behaviour and that these questions cannot be settled by taking a stance on Naturalism or Non-Naturalism in ethics.

For Smith, important questions relevant to the absolutist and relativist debate are *a priori* rather than *a posteriori* — meaning that these debates must be analysed and investigated by methods that do not involve testing the world. Thus, testing the world in order to determine the natural or non-natural status of moral properties cannot settle the *a priori* differences between relativists and absolutists.

## 7. OBJECTIONS TO NATURALISM

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G. E. Moore was a supporter of Cognitivism and Realism. However, Moore was not a naturalist — he was a non-naturalist — and objected to the idea that moral properties were natural properties. Moore's objection to identifying moral properties as natural properties was two-fold. Firstly, he thought that moral properties were fundamentally simple and secondly he thought the identification of the moral with the natural failed what he termed the Open Question Argument.

Moore's first objection to Naturalism, from simplicity, is based on an analogy between moral properties and color properties. According to Moore, the concept of the color yellow is a fundamentally simple concept in so far as it cannot be explained in terms of any other concept or property. Consider, as an example of a complex property, the idea of a horse. A horse can be explained

to someone who has never come into contact with the animal because the concept of a horse can be reduced to simpler part. As a mammal of a typically brown color, with certain organs and certain dimensions. In an obvious way, the concept of a horse can be broken down to simpler components.

Moore denies that the same is true for the concept of yellow. Yellow cannot be explained to someone who has not come into visual contact with it, because yellow is a simple concept that cannot be broken down into simpler component parts. Yellow is just yellow, and we can say nothing else about it that will explain it in simpler terms. The same, says Moore, is true for moral properties. According to Moore:

If I am asked, 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.<sup>8</sup>

On this basis, Moore cannot accept that moral properties can be reduced to natural properties as this would imply that moral properties are not fundamentally simple. The utilitarian, for example, defines goodness in terms of pleasure and so reduces goodness to pleasure. Moore suggests that moral naturalists make a mistake in trying to ground simple moral properties in terms of other natural properties.

As it stands, Moore's analogy between goodness and yellow has some argumentative pull but lacks sufficient robustness. However, Moore's Open Question Argument more formally drives home his point.

Moore suggests that we take some putative moral claim such as "giving to charity is good". For goodness, Moore suggests we follow the naturalist's lead and insert some natural property such as "pleasure". Now, we have the claim that "giving to charity is pleasurable". This identification between goodness and pleasure is the type of identification a naturalist about goodness might have in mind.

However, according to Moore it remains an open question as to whether or not something creating pleasure is actually good. The question remains meaningful in a way that it should not remain meaningful if goodness is actually reducible to pleasure. After all, it is not possible to meaningfully ask whether or not a bachelor is an unmarried man as the concept of a bachelor can be reduced to the concept of an unmarried man. Thus, if this utilitarian-style naturalist is correct about the identification of goodness and pleasure, it should not be a meaningful question — an open question — to ask whether a pleasurable act is a morally good act. Yet, it seems to remain open as to whether Action A is good, even if I am told that Action A is pleasurable.

Moore suggests that any attempted reduction of a moral property to a natural property will leave a meaningful open question of the form “this act possesses the natural property suggested” but “is it a good act”? Julia Tanner provides a modern example of the Open Question Argument in action:

Some people talk as if they think that that which has evolved is the same thing as being good. Thus, for instance, capitalism may be justified on the basis that it is merely an expression of ‘the survival of the fittest’ and ‘the survival of the [fittest]’ is good. To make such an argument is, according to Moore, to commit the naturalistic fallacy because good has been defined as something other than itself, as ‘the survival of the fittest’.<sup>9</sup>

Tanner refers to the Naturalistic Fallacy, which is Moore’s own terminology for the mistake of attempting to reduce the moral property to the natural property. All such attempted reductions will fail because it will always be possible to meaningfully ask whether the suggested natural property is actually good; if this question is open then goodness does not equal the suggested natural property. Think of the Open Question Argument as the searchlight seeking out those who commit the naturalistic fallacy.

It is worth noting that Moore’s arguments, although directed against naturalistic reductions of goodness, are just as powerful

against non-natural reductions of goodness. Any attempt to reduce the concept of goodness to, for example, “what God wills” will also fail because the question of “this is what God wills, but is it good?” appears to remain open. Self-evidently, this non-natural reduction is not an example of a naturalistic fallacy, but it can be no more acceptable if, like Moore, you believe that good is a fundamentally simple concept.

## 8. COGNITIVIST AND REALIST THEORY TWO: NON-NATURALISM

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Moore’s critique of Naturalism sets the scene for his own metaethical view. According to Moore, moral properties do exist but they are fundamentally simple non-natural properties. The best way to understand what non-natural means is as follows. If Goodness is non-natural then it is not the kind of property that is discoverable through the kind of empirical means that help us to identify natural properties, such as in the sciences. How we might come to know non-natural properties depend on the particular theory under consideration. However, typically non-naturalists think that we intuit the presence of these simple non-natural properties via a moral sense. So although intuitions are about how we discover moral properties rather than what moral properties are like, typically non-naturalists are also intuitionists.

Richard Price (1723–1791) suggested that truths are intuited when they are acquired “without making any use of any process of reasoning”.<sup>10</sup> More contemporarily, W. D. Ross (1877–1971) suggested that we intuit self-evident moral truths “without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself”.<sup>11</sup> An example should make this method of intuiting non-natural moral properties much clearer.

Becky is watching a BBC news report on a woman who has been helped to hear for the first time in her life via the use of new medical technology. Having been so helped, the news report

points out that this person has made a documentary which involves her passing on this technology to poor children who are living with deafness in Bangladesh. While watching the report and the associated interview, Becky intuitively feels the fact that the doctors have acted in a morally good way in researching and implementing the cure for this woman's deafness and that she too is acting morally well in helping others to hear. The moral goodness is self-evident in the situation and does not require Becky to use her faculties of reason to identify it; the property of goodness is picked up via her moral sense.

W. D. Ross specifically suggests that there are various self-evident *prima facie* duties that we can intuit (*prima facie* meaning, in this sense, apparent on first glance); duties that should guide our behavior but that sometimes can be overridden by other competing duties. Ross outlines duties such as not harming others, not lying, and keeping promises. Ross suggests that no formal empirical or logical defense of these duties is appropriate because they are self-evident. We cannot argue to the claim we should not lie, only from it in terms of how to act in specific situations.

If you are an intuitionist and a realist this might offer a route to surviving both the Open Question Argument and the Naturalistic Fallacy. Intuitionists claim that moral properties are fundamentally simple and non-natural, open to apprehension via our moral sense. When we utter moral sentences we seek to describe the presence of such properties accurately and, sometimes, we will correctly and appropriately refer to the presence of these non-natural properties in the world. When we so appropriately refer, we make true moral statements.

## 9. OBJECTIONS TO INTUITIONISM

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Intuitionism offers a way around the Open Question Argument and the Naturalistic Fallacy, consequently it has a number of modern

proponents (e.g. Ralph Wedgewood). However, objections to a basic Intuitionism are not particularly difficult to conceive of.

Firstly, Intuitionism might be thought to struggle when explaining moral disagreement. If moral truths are self-evident and can be intuited, then why do even self-professed intuitionists such as Moore and Ross have radically different ethical views (Moore is a teleologist, whereas Ross intuites proto-Kantian moral truths).

In response, Ross has suggested that we need a certain moral maturity to our intuitive sense, just as our other faculties require maturity and tuning to properly pick up on features of the world. Indeed, Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) suggested that, among other things, stupidity may lead to our intuitions going astray and this may explain continuing moral disagreement. If only we were less daft, our intuitive moral sense might be more reliable!

In addition, on a related note, we may wonder how such intuitive moral judgments might be properly verified. If you support the Verification Principle — which you may be lucky enough to come across in a unit on Religious Language — then you believe that statements that cannot be empirically verified (tested against the world to determine their truth or falsity) or are true by definition are meaningless.

If moral judgments are intuitively supported judgments about non-natural properties, then it is not clear how we could verify whether it is Moore or Ross, to use two examples, who intuites goodness correctly. Certainly, we could not use empirical means to test for the presence of non-natural properties in the world. Thus, verificationists may suggest that moral statements — if Intuitionism is correct — would be meaningless in virtue of our inability to verify such statements.

Finally, returning to the theme of disagreement, we might posit evidence that our intuitions are so unreliable that they are better understood as irrational moral judgments expressing our own feelings or personal beliefs, rather than judgments giving voice to

the existence of mind-independent, objective, non-natural moral properties.

Consider responses to the standard ethical dilemma of a trolley case. In one version, you can redirect a train to save five people tied to the track, but doing so will kill one person tied in the path of the redirected train. In a second case, you can save five people tied to the track by pushing one rather portly gentleman to his death in front of the train to stop its progress. Most responders favor saving five over one in the first case, but favor saving one over five in the second case. If our intuitions point so divergently when we make moral judgments, might we be better to assume our pre-rational intuitive responses are expressions of feelings or initial beliefs, rather than a reflection of objective truths?

Perhaps responses based on moral maturity or stupidity will apply here also, but this may be harder to hold when explaining one person's own personal divergent intuitions about such cases rather than disagreement across a group of different people.

J. L. Mackie (1917–1981) also offers criticisms of Intuitionism, but these are explored in the next section as they feed into explanation of Mackie's own Moral Error Theory. It is, as ever, for you to judge whether the intuitionist has any plausible defence of their theory against the criticisms suggested thus far.

## 10. COGNITIVIST AND ANTI-REALIST THEORY ONE: MORAL ERROR THEORY

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Thus far, we have seen that Cognitivism tends to be associated with Realism. Mackie breaks with this trend with his Moral Error Theory. Mackie accepts that our moral utterances are expressions of truth-apt beliefs, but denies Realism. In so doing, Mackie denies that possibility that our truth-apt beliefs are ever true, because a moral description of the world can never accurately describe a world without any moral properties in it.

In Mackie's own words, "Although most people in making moral



judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false”.<sup>12</sup> By prescriptive, Mackie means action-guiding and Mackie denies that any objective guides to action (moral properties, in our terms) actually exist.

Mackie’s view is startling and raises loads of questions about how we should live if morality is entirely false. Although interesting, these discussions are not for this chapter. Instead, we must explain and evaluate Mackie’s theory as it stands rather than consider its implications if true. A theory having depressing or liberating implications does not make that theory any more or less likely to be accurate (though it is surprising how often even the best philosophers are prone to such mistaken thinking).

Mackie’s Anti-Realism is supported by the following two arguments. It should be made clear that Mackie’s arguments are directed against both Naturalistic and Non-Naturalistic Realism.

### Argument from Relativity

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Mackie’s first objection to Realism is built out of his appreciation of the depth of moral disagreement, and so shares something with one of the objections to Intuitionism offered in the previous section. Mackie suggests that in other plausible realist disciplines, such as the sciences or history views begin to coalesce around the truth over time and disagreement is, at least in part, conquered.

Disagreement occurs in these disciplines because there is a barrier to true knowledge and scientists and historians will sometimes, through no fault of their own, be blind to the facts. However, sometimes the facts become clear and disagreement thereby reduces.

Yet, in ethics, philosophers still disagree over the same issues that they were arguing over 2000+ years ago, questions such as “when is war acceptable” and “when can promises be broken”. If moral truths really did exist and Realism was correct, should we not

have expected to find some of these truths by now? Thus, Mackie views disagreement in ethics — deep disagreement that seems impervious to solution through rational means — as evidence that Realism is incorrect; there are no moral facts to settle the debates or at least some of those debates would have been settled by now! Of course, if you think that some moral debates have been settled, then you could use this to criticize this Mackian argument.

### Argument Queerness

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Mackie's second anti-realist argument is his most famous. Moral properties — be they natural or non-natural — are supposed to be action-guiding. If it is true that murder is wrong, then we should not murder, even if we might want to. Equally, if it is true that giving to charity is right, then we should give to charity, even if we might not want to. At its core, morality is supposed to offer reasons for action that we cannot simply ignore even if we like murdering or hate charitable giving. This aspect of morality, however, raises issues at the metaethical level.

David Hume (1711–1776) recognized the potential problem with the action-guiding quality of morality when he spoke of the “is-ought” gap. According to Hume:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met, I have always [remarked], that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am [surprised] to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible, but is however, of the last consequence.<sup>13</sup>

Hume wonders why and how we move from statements about what is the case, to statements about how we ought to act. We do not make such a link between “is” and “ought” in areas other

than morality — the fact that a horse is running at Goodwood does not, of itself, give you an “ought” regarding how to act in response. The fact that a moral property is, on the other hand, does seem to give rise to such an “ought” regarding behavior. How can this be explained?

Hume has his own suggestion for explanation, and this is outlined in section twelve. Mackie, however, takes this Humean worry in his own direction. Mackie suggests that properties themselves that carry such an action-guiding quality, that offer an “ought” just because they are, would be extremely queer properties. He says that “[if] there were objective values [moral properties], then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe”.<sup>14</sup>

Mackie suggests that if we can explain moral thinking without resorting to positing the existence of such queer and utterly unique entities then we would be better off. The simpler explanation is not to grant existence to weird properties, but just to suggest that there are no properties and that our moral beliefs reflect cultural and personal beliefs. Just as we do not tend to suggest that aliens or ghosts exist on the basis of first-hand testimony (competing explanations based on drunkenness or tiredness, for example, seem more plausible) so we perhaps ought not to grant that moral properties exist just because we happen to talk about them.

Indeed, support for Anti-Realism through a complaint about the queerness of moral properties is further supported via consideration of Hume’s fork.

Hume divided knowledge into two camps — knowledge gained from relations of ideas and knowledge gained from matters of fact. Knowledge claims like “ $2+2=4$ ”, or various geometric claims like “triangles have three sides”, are established in the former way whereas knowledge claims like “Alastair is wearing a blue shirt today” are established in the latter way.

This split of types of knowledge is referred to as Hume’s fork, yet

claims to moral knowledge do not seem to fit either side of the fork. Moral knowledge is not derivable simply from relations of ideas (it is not supposed to be like geometric or mathematical truth and cannot be deduced a priori without any testing the world through our senses).

Nor, however, is it derivable simply from matters of fact, given the “is-ought” gap referred to above (a posteriori, sense-based, worldly and scientific empirical observations reveal what is, not what ought to be). If moral knowledge does not fit into either side of Hume’s fork, then it will be the case that either moral knowledge is a completely unique type of knowledge accessed in a completely unique way or, more plausibly perhaps, moral knowledge does not actually exist. But if we cannot know that moral properties exist then we should not be realists.

Hume, certainly, would have rejected the idea that moral properties existed based on the application of his famous fork. Remember, however, that Hume favoured Non-Cognitivism and Anti-Realism rather than (like Mackie) Cognitivism and Anti-Realism.

On a similar theme, Mackie strengthens the argument from queerness by referring to the queer method of understanding that we would need in order to come into contact with queer moral properties. Mackie suggests that we would need a special moral faculty in order to access queer moral properties. Although Mackie admires the honesty of the intuitionist in admitting the existence of such a queer moral sense, he does not think that it is credible to believe in the existence of such a radically different faculty for accessing realist moral properties in the world.

As before, if we can explain our moral beliefs without needing to admit the existence of queer properties, then why admit to the existence of a queer method for grasping queer properties? Moral Realism, according to Mackie, thus requires an unnecessarily queer metaphysics (what exists) and an unnecessarily queer

epistemology (how we know what exists). For these reasons, Mackie is an anti-realist.

## 11. OBJECTIONS TO MORAL ERROR THEORY

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Realists have various responses to Mackie. Firstly, realists might just agree and accept the conclusion that moral properties would be queer in virtue of bridging the “is-ought” gap; they may simply deny that such queerness is a problem. Indeed, intuitionists may be very happy to accept the uniqueness of moral properties in virtue of their fundamental simplicity and their irreducibility to other properties. Naturalists, meanwhile, may simply wonder why something being different to other things should be seen as a problem; is it not the case that everything is different to everything else, in at least some sense? In addition, Mackie’s views regarding the importance and depth of moral disagreement can be criticized.

A. J. Ayer (1910–1989), for example, felt that moral disagreements existed only where there were disagreements over the non-moral facts. On this view, Max and Ethan disagree over the morality of meat-eating only because they disagree over the non-moral fact of how much pain is endured by animals sent for slaughter. If all the non-moral facts were clear, then their disagreement would no longer persist. Thus, Ayer would have felt that moral disagreement is not as deep and pervasive as Mackie suggests.

A different response to moral disagreement is to defend the idea of moral progress. It may be tempting to argue that moral disagreement has actually reduced over time because we have come into contact with truths regarding the badness of slavery, sexism and racism etc. Moral Error Theory denies the possibility of moral progress in virtue of denying any moral truth; progress requires correct answers. If you believe that progress has been made in ethics, perhaps in the form of human rights being identified, then you have a reason to disagree with Moral Error Theory.

Moral Error Theory is also highly counterintuitive. It says that all of your moral beliefs are false and that they could never be true because no moral truth making properties exist in the world. It suggests that murder is not morally wrong (but it is not morally right either!) and that giving to charity is not morally right (but it is not morally wrong either!). Given there is no truth to be found in ethics, it might be thought that we should abandon our faulty moral language entirely — a rather extreme metaethical conclusion!

However, if you do accept Cognitivism as an accurate explanation of moral language and psychology, but find it hard to grant that objective, mind-independent moral facts or properties actually exist in the world, then Moral may be worth these seeming costs.

## 12. NON-COGNITIVISM

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Prior to an explanation and evaluation of the specific theoretical options for the non-cognitivist, it is worthwhile just providing a few words in favor of Non-Cognitivism more generally.

If you are impressed by anti-realist arguments but do not wish to end up an error theorist, then it may be worth denying Cognitivism rather than following Mackie. Indeed, this is what the majority of anti-realists tend to do. Thus, non-cognitivists will be unconcerned by the lack of moral properties in the world because they deny that our moral utterances are attempts to pick such properties out.

As well as supporting Anti-Realism, Hume's identification of the "is-ought" gap might be taken as helpful evidence for Non-Cognitivism. If moral utterances carry with them an action-guiding force, this may be because moral utterances are not descriptive beliefs but are instead expressions of attitudes, feelings or emotions. This picture is certainly what Hume had in mind given his Humean Theory of Motivation. Hume claimed that beliefs alone cannot motivate behavior because beliefs are motivationally inert. The function of a belief as a psychological state is to offer a motivationally neutral description of the world; beliefs say what

we believe “is” and do not by themselves lead to us to action. To be motivated to actually act, according to Hume, a belief must be coupled with a desire in our heads. The following case should make Hume’s claim clearer.

Liz believes that her friends will soon be arriving for a barbecue. However, Liz lacks any desire to cater for her friends and so does not act. Liz’s belief, by itself, does not and cannot motivate action on her part. Now, if we change the situation and add to Liz’s psychology a desire to feed and cater for her friends, then Liz would come to be motivated to act and prepare a delightfully sumptuous feast. Thus, Hume argues, desires are required in the explanation of our actions.

So why is this relevant to a defence of Non-Cognitivism? Well, when a person utters a moral phrase, if the phrase is sincerely uttered, then they’ll be motivated. For example, if I utter the words “giving to charity, for those who can afford to do so, is morally required”, then you would expect me to be motivated to give charity if I were able to do so; if I chose not to give to charity in that circumstance you might question the sincerity of my moral utterance.

Moral utterances, and relevant moral motivations, seem to be remarkably well tied to each other. Now, if moral utterances were expressions of moral beliefs we would need to, in addition to the moral belief, grant the existence of a continuous desire to do what we believe is moral. However, if moral utterances were themselves moral desires then we need not add the extra belief into our psychology. If the phrase “giving to charity is morally right” is simply an expression of my desire that everyone should give to charity, then it is exceedingly simple to explain why our moral utterances and our motivations tend to track each other so well — our moral utterances are just expressions of our moral desires! But the claim that our moral judgements are simply an expression of our desires just is Non-Cognitivism.

### 13. NON-COGNITIVIST AND ANTI-REALIST THEORY ONE: EMOTIVISM

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A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson (1908–1979) were defenders of Emotivism, a metaethical view that held considerable sway for a time in the early parts of the twentieth century. According to Emotivism, the moral statement that murder is wrong is simply an expression of emotion against the act of murdering. It gives formal linguistic voice to what is essentially a negative “boo” to murder. Indeed, Emotivism is referred to as the “boo/hurrah” metaethical theory; when we claim that something is morally wrong we boo that action and when we claim that something is morally right we hurrah that action. This explains the connection between morality and motivation; we express motivationally-relevant emotional distaste or emotional approval when we use moral words rather than expressing motivationally inert moral beliefs.

Although a verificationist about language himself, Ayer did not wish to deny that moral utterances had a meaning even though, as a non-cognitivist and anti-realist, he plainly could not suggest that moral utterances were empirically verifiable or open to real-world testing in order to determine their truth value (moral utterances, on this view, are not truth-apt beliefs attempting to describe the world). Thus, Ayer suggested that moral utterances had an emotive meaning. Ayer, speaking of the claim that “stealing money is wrong” says this is simply an act of “...evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, ‘You stole that money’ in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the moral judgment meaningfully reveals an emotion, even if not a description of the world. Emotivism does not, therefore, straightforwardly lead to nihilism as some meaning for moral values and moral judgments is preserved. On this basis, there is no pull to the idea that we should stop using moral language.

Stevenson, in addition, suggested of moral terms like “right”,



“wrong”, “good” and “bad” that they have only emotive meanings in the sense of approval and disapproval. Therefore, just as we cannot say that a “boo” is false, for it is not truth-apt so too we cannot say that a linguistic boo of the form “stealing is wrong” is either true or false. Stevenson thus argued that Emotivism captured the “magnetism” of morality — our moral utterances track our motivations because our moral utterances are expressions of the emotions that underpin our motivations.

#### 14. OBJECTIONS TO EMOTIVISM

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Despite early popularity, Emotivism is not a popular position today and it is widely considered to be an unduly and unhelpfully simplistic form of Non-Cognitivism. We consider three objections here.

Firstly, on a psychological level, Emotivism is unlikely to feel correct. When I suggest that a certain action is right or wrong, I take myself to be making a claim that is true and making a claim that reflects how I take the world to be (reflecting a moral belief in my head). I do not consider myself to be booing an action in a rather academic and indirect way. We might question whether abstract philosophizing about the meaning of words should ever trump our own psychological reflections when it comes to what we mean when we utter moral sentences. Can it be the case that Ayer or Stevenson knew better than I what I meant when I said that “terrorism is morally wrong”? Can they know better than you, if you take yourself to be making truth-apt and descriptive moral judgments?

Secondly, some of our moral utterances do not seem to be in the least part emotional. For example, Charlotte may feel that “it is wrong to avoid paying tax” but be quite depressed about this judgment. If we were cognitivists, this emotional divorce could be easily explained; Charlotte believes there to be a moral fact that is independent of her mind and her desires and this fact depresses

her. However, it is not immediately obvious how Emotivism might explain Charlotte's "boo to avoiding tax" when she harbors a desire to avoid tax herself. Perhaps we can have second-order emotions about our emotions (Charlotte is sad that she feels negatively towards tax avoiding), or perhaps Charlotte feels that others should not avoid tax — boo them — while she is happy act in this way — hurrah for her own tax avoidance. However, both of these responses require careful statement and defense if you seek to pursue them.

Finally, we can return to moral disagreement. Consider a sincere moral disagreement between William and Wendy over the issue of euthanasia. Wendy says that euthanasia is morally right in at least some cases, whilst William says that euthanasia is morally wrong in all circumstances. William and Wendy may seem to be disagreeing via utilizing logic and reason just as scientists, or economists, or computer technicians, disagree over a substantively correct answer that is independent of their own minds.

However, once the facts of matter are agreed upon the emotivist must reduce this disagreement to a series of emotional boo's and hurrah's regarding euthanasia, where truth is never the aim of the moral utterances. Suggesting that moral debates are always emotive rather than factual, and so are swayed only by emotional rather than rational means, is a controversial claim given that moral reasons seem to be deployed very carefully in just such debates. Indeed, the emotivist explanation of moral debate seems to suggest moral arguments have more in common with arguments over which ice-cream flavor is best (boo for chocolate, hurrah for vanilla) than with truth-based disagreements in other academic disciplines. If this is not how we believe moral debates should be described, then Emotivism has a problem. As Richard Brandt suggests "Ethical statements do not look like the kind of thing the emotive theory says they are".<sup>16</sup> Brandt, as per the above discussion, feels that moral utterances are things we take to be

truth-apt, contra the emotivist interpretation of those moral utterances.

The previous objection to Emotivism may seem to highlight possible links between Emotivism and moral relativism. But do not be deceived. As opposed to absolutists, hold that no moral claim is ever absolutely true in all circumstances. As a specific type of relativist, the cultural relativist may suggest that the claim “murder is wrong” can be true in some cultural settings and false in others depending on the different cultural standards for behavior. Thus, there may be some suggestion that Cultural Relativism and Emotivism have the same set of grounding beliefs — no absolute moral truths exist and moral expressions reflect the culturally backed emotions of particular speakers, rather than anything more absolutely and mind-independently true.

However, this is a mistake. Contra Emotivism, cultural relativists do tend to believe in a form of realist moral truth, even if such relativists do not hold that absolute moral truths exist. Whilst the cultural relativist may admit that ethical judgments often reflect personal and culturally supported emotions, they define goodness as a genuine property that is determined or fixed in nature by the cultural standards of a given society.

Thus, if “murder is wrong” is a true relative to my culture, then it is still true. I am, therefore, mistaken if I claim that “murder is acceptable”, at least within the boundaries of my society even if not in the societies of others. This truth is non-absolute and relative to culture, but the cultural relativist accepts that it exists and that our moral statements attempt to describe such truths. On the other hand, the emotivist, obviously, does not accept that our moral statements are such attempted descriptions of realist, albeit relativistic, moral truths.

## 15. NON-COGNITIVIST AND ANTI-REALIST THEORY TWO: PRESCRIPTIVISM

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R. M. Hare was a committed non-cognitivist and anti-realist but he was not a defender of a simple emotivist position. Instead, Hare was a metaethical prescriptivist.

As a prescriptivist, Hare felt that our moral utterances express more than just emotional approval and disapproval. Instead, our moral utterances express a subjective prescription for others to act in accordance with our moral judgments. So, for example, if William claimed that “euthanasia is morally wrong” then this utterance means that William wants others to cease supporting or deciding in favor of euthanasia. Prescriptivism thus attempts to capture the action-guiding nature of moral utterances without resorting to claims of moral truth.

Prescriptivism also seems to better account for moral disagreement than does Emotivism, because Prescriptivism suggests that the action-guiding normative edge of moral utterances is fundamentally built into the meaning of a moral statement. In addition, perhaps crucially, Prescriptivism also allows us to legitimately criticize another person for their moral views without needing to invoke claims of realist moral truth or realist moral falsehood. Consider the following example.

Cristina claims that “murder is universally and absolutely morally wrong”. According to the prescriptivist, this is not a descriptive belief but is a reflection of Cristina’s non-cognitive attitude that no one should ever murder. However, if Cristina later utters the words “murdering this terrible dictator is morally acceptable”, then we can criticize Cristina’s inconsistency. On the one hand, she wants no one to ever murder whilst on the other hand also wanting the murder of a terrible dictator. It is not that Cristina had made a false moral claim that justifies criticism of her, according to the prescriptivist, but it is her inconsistency in the actions she prescribes for others that justifies criticism. Thus, we cannot cry

“false!” against Cristina, but we can cry “inconsistent”. This, at least, may give some genuine meaning back to moral disagreement and provide a method for legitimately and rationally criticizing the moral claims of others. Prescriptivism is, on this basis, often viewed as a step-up on Emotivism when it comes to non-cognitivist and anti-realist metaethical theories.

## 16. OBJECTIONS TO PRESCRIPTIVISM

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Many of the challenges to Prescriptivism carry over from the challenges suggested regarding Emotivism. The prescriptivist must also explain why they know better the meaning of our moral statements than we do, at least if we take ourselves to be making truth-apt and descriptive claims about moral properties in the world.

In addition, we might accept that Prescriptivism captures the qualities of moral disagreement better than Emotivism, but deny that the picture of moral disagreement offered by the prescriptivist is good enough. After all, is inconsistency the most serious objection we can make to someone with whom we disagree morally? Prescriptivism does not allow us to suggest that a racist who believes “it is morally acceptable to kill those of a different racial background” utters something false. Indeed, so long as the racist holds morally consistent views then we have no grounds to criticize his position at all. If we feel that retaining the ability to cry “false!” — with proper, rational and realist justification — is important when confronting the moral views of racists, sexists and other morally deplorable individuals, then Prescriptivism does not offer the tools that we need. Of course, the prescriptivist may reply that we cannot claim that Realism is correct just because we wish it to be so and that Prescriptivism, like it or not, is actually the proper understanding of the meaning of our moral judgments. Again, this is a judgment you should make for yourself.

## SUMMARY

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There is much more that could be said in this chapter. Metaethical theories are as varied and nuanced as their normative rivals, and it is impossible to give a fair hearing to all of them in a single chapter. Catherine Wilson has authored an inquiry into Metaethics that reflects the challenge of coming to your own, first-person, view on these issues.<sup>17</sup> However, we have tried as far as possible on this whistle-stop tour to outline these theories clearly and to give them such a fair hearing. It is for you to decide where you sit in the debate between Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism, Realism and Anti-Realism, and, more generally, to decide how much importance Metaethics has relative to the normative and applied camps of ethical study.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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A priori  
A posteriori  
Anti-Realism  
Cognitivism  
Empirical  
Naturalistic Fallacy  
Non-Cognitivism  
Normative  
Prescriptivism  
Prima facie  
Queer  
Realism  
Relativism  
Semantic  
Truth-apt  
Verificationism

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1 A. J. Ayer, 'A Critique of Ethics', p. 21.

2 R. Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, p. 14.

3 R. Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, p. 37.

4 P. Railton, 'Moral Realism', p. 165.

5 G. Kahane, 'Must Metaethical Realism Make a Semantic Claim?'

6 G. Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, p. 79.

7 S. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, p. 49.

8 G. E. Moore, 'The Open-Question Argument: The Subject Matter of Ethics', p. 35.

9 J. Tanner, 'The Naturalistic Fallacy', [http://www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/rjp13\\_tanner.php](http://www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/rjp13_tanner.php)

10 R. Price, 'A Review of the Principle Questions in Morals', p. 159.

11 W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 29.

12 J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 35.

13 D. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, <http://www.davidhume.org/texts/thn.html>

14 J. L. Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 38.

15 A. J. Ayer, 'The Emotive Theory of Ethics', p. 106.



16 R. Brandt, *Ethical Theory: The Problems of Normative and Critical Ethics*, p. 226.

17 C. Wilson, *Metaethics from a First Person Standpoint*, <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/reader/417>



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# *What is Cultural Relativism?*

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INTRODUCTION](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Cultural_Anthropology/Introduction)

Cultural relativism is the ability to understand a culture on its own terms and not to make judgments using the standards of one's own culture. The goal of this is promote understanding of cultural practices that are not typically part of one's own culture. Using the perspective of cultural relativism leads to the view that no one culture is superior than another culture when compared to systems of morality, law, politics, etc<sup>1</sup>.

It is a concept that cultural norms and values derive their meaning within a specific social context. This is also based on the idea that there is no absolute standard of good or evil; therefore, every decision and judgment of what is right and wrong is individually decided in each society. The concept of cultural relativism also means that any opinion on ethics is subject to the perspective of each person within their particular culture. Overall, there is no right or wrong ethical system. In a holistic understanding of the term cultural relativism, it tries to counter ethnocentrism by promoting the understanding of cultural

practices that are unfamiliar to other cultures such as eating insects, genocides or genital cutting.

There are two different categories of **cultural relativism**:

- **Absolute:** Complete acceptance and tolerance for any type of cultural practice.
- **Critical:** Critiquing cultural practices in terms of human rights.

Absolute cultural relativism is displayed in many cultures, especially Africa, that practice female genital cutting. This procedure refers to the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or any other trauma to the female reproductive/genital organs. By allowing this procedure to happen, females are considered women and then are able to be married. FGC is practiced mainly because of culture, religion and tradition. Outside cultures such as the United States look down upon FGC as inhumane, but are unable to stop this practice from happening because it is protected by its culture.



A Chinese woman with her feet unbound

Cultural relativism can also be seen with the Chinese culture and their process of [feet binding](#). Foot binding was to stop the growth of the foot and make them smaller. The process often began between four and seven years old. A ten foot bandage would be

wrapped around the foot forcing the toes to go under the foot. It caused the big toe to be closer to the heel causing the foot to bow<sup>2</sup>. In China, small feet were seen as beautiful and a symbol of status. The women wanted their feet to be “three-inch golden lotuses”三寸金蓮<sup>3</sup>. It was also the only way to get married. Because men only wanted women with small feet, even after this practice was banned in 1912, women still continued to do it. To Western cultures the idea of feet binding might seem like torture, but for the Chinese culture it is symbol of beauty that has been ingrained in the culture for hundreds of years. The idea of beauty differs from culture to culture.

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# *Distinguishing Between Ethical Relativism, Subjectivism & Objectivism*

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### **Ethical Relativism**

Ethical Relativism is the theory that an ethical viewpoint can be specific to a given society. In particular, this acknowledges that what may be considered the norm in one culture, is out of the ordinary in another. Morality is therefore relative to the norm of one's culture. As anthropologist Ruth Benedict illustrates in *Patterns of Culture*, diversity is evident even on those matters of morality where we would expect to agree: *"We might suppose that in the matter of taking life all peoples would agree on condemnation. On the contrary, in the matter of homicide, it may be held that one kills by custom his two children, or that a husband has a right of life and death over his wife or that it is the duty of the child to kill his parents before they are old. It may be the case that those are killed who steal fowl, or*

*who cut their upper teeth first, or who are born on Wednesday. Among some peoples, a person suffers torment at having caused an accidental death, among others, it is a matter of no consequence."*<sup>1</sup>

According to ethical relativism, there are no universal moral standards—standards that can be applied to all people at all times. The only moral standards that can judge a society's practices are its own. If ethical relativism is correct, there can be no universal framework for resolving moral disputes, or agreement on ethical matters between members of different societies.

### **Subjectivism**

Subjectivism is an extension of relativism, as applied to individuals rather than societies. The moral interpretation of a practice or event is based on the personal perspective of the individual analyzing it. In other words, the judgment of an event is dependent on the individual doing the judging. *Ethical subjectivism is an example of an anti-realist moral theory.\**

### **Objectivism**

Something is objective when it is independent of any individual's personal beliefs. It is, in other words, a fact of the universe, separate from human beliefs — such as the weight of an object. This forms the basis for moral realism: The idea that ethics and morals are not invented, but rather discovered over time. Ethicists typically try to maintain objectivity in their analysis, stressing that it does not matter who the person is, or what they choose to do; rather, they try to determine what the person *should* do, or what their decision *ought* to be. *Moral objectivism may also be referred to as moral realism.\**

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1. Ruth Benedict (1934). *Patterns of Culture*. Mariner Books.

*\*Denotes text added to the original source.*



Distinguishing Between Ethical Relativism, Subjectivism & Objectivism by WIKIBOOKS Ethics for IT Professionals/What Is Ethics [https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Ethics\\_for\\_IT\\_Professionals/What\\_Is\\_Ethics#What\\_is\\_Ethics,\\_Morals\\_and\\_Laws](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Ethics_for_IT_Professionals/What_Is_Ethics#What_is_Ethics,_Morals_and_Laws) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

## CHAPTER 36

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# *Relativism and Subjectivism*

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## **CHAPTER**

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# **AREN'T RIGHT AND WRONG JUST MATTERS OF OPINION? ON MORAL RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM**

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**PAUL REZKALLA**

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*An Hindoo Woman throwing herself on the funeral pyre of her Husband by Frederic Shoberl. In The World in Miniature: Hindoostan via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.*

Her recently deceased husband lay on the funeral pyre waiting to be lit. Hundreds of people from the nearby villages stood watching and waiting for the widow to carry out her duty of chastity to its culmination. As the pyre was lit, the woman took several steps toward it and crawled on top of her husband's corpse to embrace his neck. The pain was excruciating, but if she dismounted then she would shame her family and probably be lynched by a mob, anyway. So she lay there.

The practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, known as suttee or sati, was commonplace in parts of India until the nineteenth century. To allow the dead man's possessions and property to pass back into the hands of his family, his widow was expected to commit suicide and fulfill her duty of chastity by immolating herself on his funeral pyre. Several cases of widows being drowned or buried alive with their dead husbands have also been recorded. This practice lasted for 2,000 years until the British

outlawed it in 1829 on the grounds that it was inhumane and immoral (see Sharma 1988, 6-7).

Is suttee morally acceptable simply because it was practiced and endorsed by a culture? Are the British officials who outlawed suttee morally praiseworthy for imposing an outside standard on the native inhabitants of India and disrupting their ability to fulfill sacred social expectations? Is there a right answer to the question of whether or not suttee is morally acceptable?

This chapter deals with an important question in metaethics. Metaethics is the branch of ethics that deals with the nature of morality. It tries to answer the questions: What is morality? Is morality objective? Where does it come from? What is the relationship between moral facts, if they exist, and this physical world that we interact with? And so, before we figure out how we ought to be and live, we must first establish whether there even is such a thing as the way we *ought* to be and live in the first place. One of the most important questions in metaethics is whether there is a moral reality that obligates us regardless of our judgments, opinions, and beliefs and whether there are moral facts that are necessarily and universally true. Perhaps ethical codes are merely relative to groups of people. Perhaps there is no true and binding objective morality outside of culture, time period, and personal preferences. Is morality objective and universal? Or is it merely a matter of opinion and tradition?

## REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

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Think of a time when you disagreed with someone about the right thing to do. Maybe it was a friend, family member, celebrity, author, or political figure. You may have felt very strongly that X is obviously the right thing to do, the better course of action, or merely the lesser of two evils. The person you were disagreeing with might have felt similarly, and perhaps provided reasons for her position as well. Both of you made claims about morality. You each believed

that your own position was correct or true. But are these claims about morality true or false in the same way that historical and mathematical facts are true or false?

“George Washington was the thirteenth president of the United States of America” is a false historical claim because George Washington was not the thirteenth president of the United States of America. Why is this historical claim false? Because it goes against reality. Similarly, the question before us now is whether there is such a reality for morals. Are there moral facts that hold true regardless of what we think about them? Are there moral facts that are true in virtue of some mind-independent moral reality? Those who say yes fall into the moral realism camp. And those who say no fall into the moral anti-realism camp.

Moral realism is the position that there are mind-independent facts about ethics that are true and binding even if we have beliefs to the contrary. For example, the moral realist would say that it is objectively wrong to rape, even if the vast majority of people and cultures believed otherwise—the truth of “rape is wrong” holds irrespective of our opinions and judgments about rape. Realists disagree about what grounds or what constitutes the truth of these moral facts, i.e. divine commands, a set of necessary facts, the nature of sentient creatures, etc. Nonetheless, realists maintain that these moral facts exist independently of our opinions and judgments.

Moral anti-realism is simply the negation of this thesis. For the anti-realist, there are no mind-independent facts about morality; morality can be constructed or is merely relative to culture. This latter version of anti-realism is the position called moral relativism and is the subject of this chapter. Moral relativism, broadly construed, is the view that ethical codes are relative to the standpoints of the peoples who embrace them. This can mean many things, which will be discussed below, but relativists typically hold that ethical truths are relative to culture, that no culture’s ethical code is superior to another’s, and that we ought not judge

other ethical codes as inferior to our own. This position falls under the category of anti-realism because it denies that moral facts exist independently of us and argues instead that morality is simply a product of people and cultures.

## DESCRIPTIVE RELATIVISM

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The mildest and least controversial form of relativism is descriptive relativism. According to descriptive relativism, moralities and ethical codes are radically different across cultures—and we can observe this. For example, some cultures see homosexuality as immoral while others do not; some cultures think that polygamy is morally acceptable (and should even be encouraged) while others see monogamy as the moral ideal; some cultures practice slavery while others find slavery morally abhorrent, etc. This ethical diversity is not only observed and documented now by cultural anthropologists, but even ancient writers like Herodotus and some ancient Greek skeptics recognized the different ways that cultures conducted marriage, burials, military discipline, and social participation. Those who adhere merely to descriptive relativism maintain the view that moral rules are observably dissimilar across cultures. For some relativists, this suggests the falsity of moral objectivity and is used as evidence in favor of stronger versions of relativism. Not all relativists argue that descriptive relativism is evidence against moral objectivity, but relativism often starts out from the truth of descriptive relativism and makes stronger claims about moral relativity on this basis. In other words, the observation of differing moral codes across cultures does not necessarily mean that morality is relative, but some relativists use this anthropological fact as evidence for the stronger conclusions about relativism that we will look at below.

## METAETHICAL RELATIVISM

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The ancient writer Herodotus famously said, “Culture is king” based on his observations of disparate cultural moralities (Histories 3.38.4)<sup>1</sup>. Upon observing radical differences in the ways that different cultures practiced religion, burial, household organization, and even eating preferences he concluded that no standard exists beyond a culture to prescribe good and bad behavior. Thus, culture is king.

Unlike descriptive relativism, metaethical relativism makes this kind of stronger claim about the nature of moral truth. Metaethical relativism says that moral truths are actually only true relative to specific groups of people. This means that whether a moral belief is true is dependent on, or *relative to*, the standpoint of the person or culture that has the belief. Someone in Singapore and someone in England can both say “It is sunny outside,” but it is possible that the claim is only true for one of them. In a similar way, metaethical relativism is the position that ethical statements are only true relative to the context that they are spoken. In other words, when someone claims that some practice, X, is moral, then the claim is true if her culture believes and lives as if X is moral. For example, if a culture holds the view that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral, then for that culture, it is true that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral. And for the culture that believes it is morally acceptable to have pre-marital sexual relations, then “having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral” is false.

Notice that this is different from saying, “Lying might be morally permissible in certain situations such as when a murderous ax-man asks you where your family is hiding.” Metaethical relativism is not about this kind of situation-specific method of determining what is moral. Rather it says that moral beliefs and claims are true or false relative to the cultures or standpoints in which they exist.

1. [1]

## NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

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Finally, we will look at the strongest kind of relativism: normative relativism. It is the strongest kind of relativism because it goes beyond descriptive and metaethical relativism and makes an even grander claim. According to normative relativism, no person or culture ought to judge the ethical codes of other cultures as being inferior, nor should any culture intervene in another culture to prevent it from carrying out the specifics of its ethical code. The normative relativist says that we might prefer the specific morality of our culture and even be able to offer reasons for doing so, but this does not imply that ours is superior to that of others. Normative relativists argue that because no objective, independent standpoint from which to evaluate ethical codes exists, no culture can justifiably say that its morality is objectively superior.

On the face of it, this might strike us as problematic for a couple of reasons. Perhaps this principle of normative relativism *itself* is only specific to our culture and does not necessarily apply to all cultures. In other words, just because my culture accepts normative relativism this does not entail that all cultures must abide by the same principle (of normative relativism) and not consider their moralities superior. However, if the normative relativist insists that this principle is true for all cultures (that no culture should judge the moralities of other cultures or consider its morality superior), then this seems like an admission of a universal value that is true across all cultures irrespective of whether or not they believe it to be true. Remember that one of the reasons for which relativists deny moral objectivity is the implausibility of the existence of universal values and moral facts that we can come to know. And yet, if the normative relativist believes that no culture should criticize the morality of another culture (and that this principle holds true for all cultures), then this is exactly the kind of universal moral fact that the relativist denies.

## THE PROBLEM OF MORAL DIVERSITY

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As we saw in the section on descriptive relativism, the problem of moral diversity is often used as evidence in defense of relativism. Relativism seems to offer a better explanation of why there exists so much moral disagreement in the world. The moral disagreements also tend to be more profoundly observed *between* cultures rather than *within* cultures. For example, the relativist might point out that cultures disagree about the morality of homosexuality—homosexual practice is outlawed in a few countries and is even punishable by death in some (Bearak and Cameron 2016). Perhaps a clearer example is that of birth control. While some countries have made artificial birth control illegal, 92% of Americans think that birth control is morally acceptable and most Western nations have legalized most birth control methods (Gallup 2019; Kirk, et al. 2013). This seems to be a point in favor of relativism, for if morality is relative to cultures, then we would expect moral disagreements to be most evident and profound when comparing the ethical codes of different cultures. The more different the cultures, the more different the ethical codes.

The moral realist who holds that there are objective truths about values has two possible responses available to the problem of moral disagreement. The first response is to question the scope and profundity of the moral disagreement between cultures. Some realists argue that the differences between moralities in cultures are more due to differences in knowledge about the world than to actual moral disagreement. For example, imagine a culture that practices senicide—the authorized killing of the elderly. When an individual in the group reaches fifty years of age, they are expected to undergo a ceremonial honor killing. On the surface, this practice seems to clash with the moral sensibilities and intuitions of people who don't engage in this practice.

But suppose one learns some new information, that this group practices senicide because of its particular views about the afterlife.



They believe that one lives on in the afterlife with the same body that one died with. In order to build huts, find food, and raise a family in the afterlife, then, one must not have died at such an old age as to prevent one's body from being useful for these things. For this reason, the group members ensure that their elderly will be able to successfully overcome the challenges of the afterlife by ending their lives before their bodies become decrepit.

Now, their practice of senicide is undergirded by the values of care and compassion for the elderly. Most people might be horrified by such a practice, but the disagreement here is not one of values and morals but of facts about the world. Those who are horrified may not think that the elderly live on in the afterlife with the same bodies they died with. If they did, they might not find this practice so objectionable. The objectivist could thus argue that a lot of the supposedly moral differences we observe between cultures are more like this case where the disagreement concerns non-moral facts rather than moral facts.

The objectivist's second response is to question the main assumption made by the relativist when arguing from the problem of moral diversity. The relativist's argument against moral objectivity comes in two steps: first, she assumes that if there were an objective morality, then there would not be such moral diversity and second, she then rejects moral objectivity because of the presence of moral diversity. But why should we grant this first assumption? Why should we assume that if morality is objective people will not disagree?

Suppose that I give my students a quadratic equation to solve and they all come up with different answers. Does the presence of many answers entail that there is no right answer? Of course not. In mathematics there is often a correct answer to a problem regardless of whether or not we have it figured out. If morality works like math in this way, then that might show us that the correct moral answers are difficult to arrive at, but it certainly does not show that there is no right answer. The relativist's assumption

that there would be no moral diversity if moral objectivity were true is demonstrably false.

## OBJECTIONS TO RELATIVISM

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### Relative to Whom?

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One of the difficulties with moral relativism in general is answering the question of what a culture is or what counts as an appropriate body of people for morality to be relative to or dependent on. Is a village a large enough population to have its own valid, ethical code? Or is morality only relative to national governments and the laws set by them? Perhaps moral subjectivism is the correct form of relativism, and morality comes down to the judgments of individuals with each individual subject being enough to form a moral community with an ethical code.

This is a serious problem for relativism because the concept of a culture is so vague and ill-defined that it becomes almost useless for ethical discussions. Consider the example of the early, abolitionist movement in the United States prior to the abolishment of slavery: Was it wrong for a group of people in America to hold anti-slavery views given that the majority of the country was pro-slavery and the laws reflected such beliefs? Is it wrong for minority groups in other nations to hold views contrary to popular opinion and written law? If metaethical relativism is true, then a moral claim is true if it accords with the moral view of the culture and false if it is not. This would mean that the abolitionists held a false moral view because it diverged from the view of the wider culture.

Perhaps the relativist can respond that the abolitionist movement was large enough to count as a culture, and is therefore a legitimate moral position even though it differed from the majority view in that country. But this merely pushes the question

back one step further: If the abolitionists numbered only one hundred members, would this be enough to comprise a culture? What if there were only twenty? Where if there were only two? One? On what basis does the relativist define “culture” to make it significant for ethical discussion?

### Some Things Just Seem Wrong

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The most common responses to relativism come in the form of what is called a *reductio ad absurdum*—a form of argument meant to disprove a view by showing us the difficult or absurd (hence the name) conclusions that the view being responded to would lead to. If the consequences are sufficiently counterintuitive or ridiculous, then we are justified in rejecting the view as being false. For example, if I argued that every person ought to be a full-time physician you could respond that if everyone were a full-time physician, then there would be no full-time politicians, firefighters, police officers, teachers, humanitarian workers, builders, artists, etc. We cannot have a functioning society if my position were true. We need more than just full-time physicians to have a coherent society. Thus, my position leads to absurd consequences, and is certainly false! This next section will first look at three major problems that relativism faces.

If relativism is true, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some obviously wrong behaviors are actually morally acceptable simply because some cultures practice them. Most people today think that it is really morally wrong to burn widows on funeral pyres even though it was practiced by a large group of people at one point. The relativist’s position, however, commits her to conceding that even practices like suttee, female genital mutilation, infanticide, and slavery are morally acceptable to the cultures that do not see them as immoral. And because the relativist denies that there are objective morals or values that hold universally, then

there is no independent standard by which to evaluate behaviors and ethical codes.

Some relativists, like David Wong (2009), see the force of this problem and try to circumvent it by conceding that some moralities are superior because they better meet the needs of people that are consistent across all cultures. However, this attempt to rescue relativism seems to undermine relativism itself! By acknowledging that certain moralities are superior because they do a better job of helping humans flourish, the relativist has conceded that there exists at least one moral fact that is true independent of culture or standpoint, namely that human flourishing and well-being are good and we should aim to maximize them.

If the relativist thinks that this fact is true regardless of what anybody believes about it, and if the cultures whose moralities better enable human flourishing and well-being are superior to the moralities or cultures that impede human flourishing and well-being, then this admission deflates the relativist position. Acknowledging that some moralities are objectively better than others presumes that there exists some independent standard or set of facts by which we can judge moralities and ethical codes. Once the admission of some independent condition(s) is entertained then it seems that we are no longer thinking relativistically but objectively.

## Relativism and Tolerance

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This last point ties in with another argument put forward in favor of relativism, namely that it promotes tolerance. Admirably, the relativist wants us to approach the subject of ethics with humility and not rush to condemning behaviors that are different from ours as immoral. The idea is that if we acknowledge that no one culture's ethical code is superior to another, then our ability to practice tolerance naturally increases, for all moralities are equal. Relativism, it is argued, makes moral superiority unjustified.

However noble this might seem, it faces the same problem we previously discussed: If all moralities are equal, then why should we think that tolerance is a universal value? If relativism is true, then no ethical codes are superior, so why should we think an ethical code that promotes tolerance is better than the ethical code that ignores tolerance? By arguing that we should prefer relativism on the grounds that it better helps us promote and justify tolerance, then the relativist has conceded the existence of at least one universal value that all moralities can be judged by, namely tolerance. The presence of this universal value—this objective fact about the way we ought to live and behave—undercuts relativism, itself, for it concedes that there is at least one value that is not relative.

Moreover, tolerance is often an appropriate reaction to interacting with positions, beliefs, and behaviors that are different from our own. But are not some behaviors and moral viewpoints not worthy of tolerance? Surely it is appropriate to be intolerant of child abuse, indoctrination, slavery, senseless violence, oppression of the vulnerable, etc. While tolerance is obviously appropriate and even necessary in some situations, intolerance, and even indignation and moral outrage, are certainly appropriate and justified in the face of evil.

### **No Room for Social Reform and Progress**

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One of the strongest objections to relativism is the idea that if relativism is true, then there can be no such thing as social reform or moral progress. If each culture's ethical code is equally good and right, then when a country changes its ethical code from being pro-slavery to being anti-slavery this moral change is merely a change rather an improvement. Moral improvement and progress require that there be some standard toward which a society or an ethical code are approaching; they also entail that the subsequent

morality is better than the prior morality, but again this is not something that can be said if relativism is true.

When the United States abolished slavery and segregation, and gave women and minorities the right to vote, its ethical code underwent a change. But to say that it underwent an improvement requires saying that enslaving African Americans, segregating Whites from Blacks, and preventing women and minorities from voting are objectively worse, morally speaking, than their opposites. Relativism cannot consistently support such a position for relativism entails precisely the opposite, namely that there are no objective standards for morality and morality is relative to communities. If a community decides that it wants to endorse X and then later decides to morally condemn X, then both moralities are equal. No morality is superior to another.

However, this seems like another bullet to bite. Relativism implies that certain instances of obvious moral improvement are merely instances of moral change rather than moral progress. William Wilberforce's work to end the slave trade in the British Empire, Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, and eventual martyrdom, dedicated to advocating equality and eliminating racism, and the countless other moral exemplars who were able to see past culture, law, and accepted custom to recognize moral truths that get buried or obfuscated over time really did help bring about moral progress. To say otherwise seems strongly counterintuitive.

## CONCLUSION

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Much of the relativism espoused by ordinary people admirably has its roots in the virtues of tolerance for opposing views and humility about one's own positions, and in that respect, it can be applauded. However, this kind of relativism is often endorsed without the appropriate level of critical evaluation that inevitably shows the inconsistency, unlivability, and even the immoral consequences of relativism. Such consequences include:

- Moral progress is impossible.
- Certain obviously immoral behaviors like slavery and oppression of women and minorities are morally acceptable simply because they enjoy acceptance by a culture.

It's for these reasons, among others, that according to a 2009 survey only 27.7% of professional philosophers are anti-realists with only a fraction of those endorsing relativism about ethics (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 34). Relativism clashes with much of what seems to be fundamental to the human experience. We cringe when we recall the atrocities of American slavery, the Holocaust, and the Rape of Nanking. We see the wrongness of these atrocities like we see the rightness of  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Relativism suffers from several major problems and this should make us question its ability to explain the nature of morality.

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## CHAPTER 37

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# *Ayn Rand's Philosophy of Objectivism*

JODY L ONDICH WORDS OF WISDOM: INTRO TO PHILOSOPHY  
[HTTPS://MLPP.PRESSBOOKS.PUB/INTROPHIL/](https://mlpp.pressbooks.pub/introphil/)



## CHAPTER

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## AYN RAND

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**Ayn Rand**, 1905 – 1982 CE, was a Russian-American novelist and philosopher. She is best known for her two novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, and for developing a philosophical system she called Objectivism. She was born and educated in Russia, and moved to the United States in 1926. She was first noticed by the media and the general public after the publication in 1943 of her novel, *The Fountainhead*. In 1957, Rand published her best-known work, the novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand insisted that reason be the only means of acquiring knowledge and she adamantly rejected any kind of adherence to or use of religion. She supported rational and ethical egoism and rejected any form of altruism.

### Excerpts from various works

(From *The Virtue of Selfishness*. “The Objectivist Ethics” ) About Selfishness:

The Objectivist ethics proudly advocates and upholds *rational selfishness*— which means: the values required for man’s survival *qua* man — which means: the values required for *human* survival — not the values produced by the desires, the emotions, the “aspirations,” the feelings, the whims or the needs of irrational brutes, who have never outgrown the primordial practice of human sacrifices, have never discovered an industrial society and can conceive of no self-interest but that of grabbing the loot of the moment.

The Objectivist ethics holds that *human* good does not require human sacrifices and cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone. It holds that the *rational* interests of men do not clash — that there is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire

the unearned, who do not make sacrifices nor accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value.

[Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Ayn Rand](#)

*"The provocative title of Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* matches an equally provocative thesis about ethics. Traditional ethics has always been suspicious of self-interest, praising acts that are selfless in intent and calling amoral or immoral acts that are motivated by self-interest. A self-interested person, on the traditional view, will not consider the interests of others and so will slight or harm those interests in the pursuit of his own.*

*Rand's view is that the exact opposite is true: Self-interest, properly understood, is the standard of morality and selflessness is the deepest immorality."*

(From *Philosophy: Who Needs It*. "Faith and Force: the Destroyers of the Modern World") About Altruism:

What is the moral code of altruism? The basic principle of altruism is that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue and value.

Do not confuse altruism with kindness, good will or respect for the rights of others. These are not primaries, but consequences, which, in fact, altruism makes impossible. The irreducible primary of altruism, the basic absolute, is *self-sacrifice* — *which* means; self-immolation, self-abnegation, self-denial, self-destruction — *which* means: the *self* as a standard of evil, the *selfless* as a standard of the good.

Do not hide behind such superficialities as whether you should or should not give a dime to a beggar. That is not the issue. The issue is whether you *do* or *do not* have the right to exist *without* giving him that dime. The issue is whether you must keep buying your life, dime by dime, from any beggar who might choose to approach you. The issue is whether the need of others is the first mortgage on your life and the moral purpose of your existence. The issue is

whether man is to be regarded as a sacrificial animal. Any man of self-esteem will answer: "No." Altruism says: "Yes."

*Testifying before Congress*

(From *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, "Selfishness Without a Self") About Altruism:

It is obvious why the morality of *altruism* is a tribal phenomenon. Prehistorical men were physically unable to survive without clinging to a tribe for leadership and protection against other tribes. The cause of altruism's perpetuation into civilized eras is not physical, but psycho-epistemological: the men of self-arrested, perceptual mentality are unable to survive without tribal leadership and "protection" against

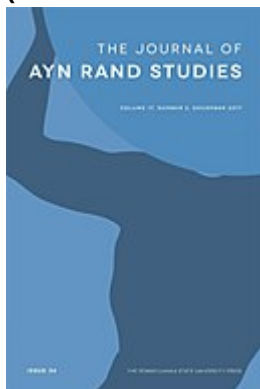


reality. The doctrine of self-sacrifice does not offend them: they have no sense of self or of personal value — they do not know what it is that they are asked to sacrifice — they have no firsthand inkling of such things as intellectual integrity, love of truth, personally chosen values, or a passionate dedication to an idea. When they hear injunctions against "selfishness," they believe that what they must renounce is the brute, mindless whim-worship of a tribal lone wolf. But their leaders — the theoreticians of altruism — know better. Immanuel Kant knew it; John Dewey knew it; B. F. Skinner knows it; John Rawls knows it. Observe that it is not the mindless brute, but reason, intelligence, ability, merit, self-confidence, self-esteem that they are out to destroy.

*I swear, by my life and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.*

*Ayn Rand*

**(From *For the New Intellectual*. "Galt's Speech") About the Self:**



The *self* you have betrayed is your mind; *self-esteem* is reliance on one's power to think. The ego you seek, that essential "*you*" which you cannot express or define, is not your emotions or inarticulate dreams, but your *intellect*, that judge of your supreme tribunal whom you've impeached in order to drift at the mercy of any stray shyster you describe as your "feeling."

*The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.*     Ayn Rand

**(From *For the New Intellectual*. "Galt's Speech") About the Self:**

*Who is John Galt?*

My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists — and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these. To live, man must hold three things as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason — Purpose — Self-esteem. Reason, as his only tool of knowledge — Purpose, as his choice of the happiness which that tool must proceed to achieve — Self-esteem, as his inviolate certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness, which means: is worthy of living. These three values imply and require all of man's virtues, and all his virtues pertain to the relation of existence and consciousness: rationality, independence, integrity, honesty, justice, productiveness, pride.



*\*Changes from original text include the removal of links to videos.*





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## **PART VII**

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# **APPLIED ETHICS**



## *Applied Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes*

### **Applied Ethics - Content Learning Outcomes**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA

By the end of this learning unit, student will be able to:

- Identify and evaluate concrete moral dilemmas.
- Apply moral concepts and theories to concrete moral dilemmas.
- Argue for and defend solutions to concrete moral dilemmas



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## *Guiding Questions to Ask for the Application of Utilitarianism, Deontology & Virtue Ethics to Real Life*

RADFORD UNIVERSITY, RADFORD UNIVERSITY CORE HANDBOOK, [HTTPS://LCUBBISON.PRESSBOOKS.COM/](https://lcubbison.pressbooks.com/)

### **How do I apply utilitarianism in real life?**

When faced with an ethical dilemma, ask yourself:

1. Which option would have better results?
2. Which option would further the greater good?
3. How can I maximize benefits for all involved?
4. How can I minimize suffering for all involved?

### **How can I apply deontology in real life?**

When confronted with an ethical dilemma, consider:

- Which option is simply the right thing to do?
- What duties or obligations do you need to consider?
- Which option best respects the rights of all stakeholders?
- Which option treats people fairly and equally?
- Which option has the best motivation or intention?
- If applicable: Which option is supported by a professional code of conduct?

### **How can I apply virtue ethics in real life?**

When confronted with an ethical dilemma, consider:

- Which option would a good person choose?
- Would I feel comfortable if everyone knew I'd made that choice?
- Which option shows care for those that are vulnerable?
- What virtues and vices apply in this context?
- What is the proper application/ measure of virtues appropriate to this choice?



This work ([Guiding Questions to Ask for the Application of Utilitarianism, Deontology & Virtue Ethics to Real Life](https://lucubison.pressbooks.com/) by Radford University, Radford University Core Handbook, <https://lucubison.pressbooks.com/>) is free of known copyright restrictions.

## Conscience

## CONSCIENCE



## Friedrich Nietzsche

Each of us has, at one time or another, talked about our conscience. We might have been “pricked by our conscience” or our conscience



might have “butted in” when it was not wanted. We might be going on quite happily telling a lie to a friend, or might have accidentally walked out of a shop without paying for something and it is our conscience that makes us confess or stops us in our tracks spins us on our heels and takes us back into the shop.

People from different walks of life talk of the “conscience”, from the religious believer, the politician, the celebrity, to every day folk; we might hear someone berate their conscience for nagging them to do something they do not want to. People might be labelled “conscientious objectors” because they feel their conscience is telling them to object to certain political actions, e.g. war. A protester might lament the erosion of their “freedom of conscience”. And we can find concepts very similar to “conscience” in many non-Christian religious traditions both Eastern and Western throughout history and from around the globe.<sup>1</sup>

However, the nature of conscience is obscure and consequently the philosophical discussion of conscience is complex and has a long history. It draws on issues in philosophical psychology, philosophy of religion, epistemology, philosophy of mind, applied ethics, normative ethics and Metaethics.

In this chapter we’ll give a general overview of two theories of conscience. One draws on Aquinas’s account; the other Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939). Although Freud is not typically seen as a philosopher (he’s a psychologist) his account will provide us with some insights which allows us to think philosophically about this thing we call “the conscience”.

## 2. THE HISTORY OF CONSCIENCE

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In the twenty-first century conscience is not thought of as solely a religious idea. However talk of “conscience” was popularized, at least in “the West”, due to its adoption by both Protestant and Catholic traditions. In this section we’ll look how “conscience” is, and has been, used in order to draw out some general features.

“Conscience” played a role in one of the most famous speeches in the protestant reformation. Martin Luther (1483–1546), being charged with heresy and being forced to recant by Charles V, stands his grounds and says “Here I stand, I can do no other” and “I cannot nor will I retract anything, since it is never safe nor virtuous to go against conscience”. Luther believed that his God-given conscience was not allowing him to recant, not even under the considerable pressure by the powerful people before him. Or consider a more recent example.

In the midst of political turmoil of the civil rights movement Martin Luther King Jr., who was under threat and constant pressure to change his views said:

But, conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right.<sup>2</sup>

Conscience is, then, powerful. It seems that it can move a person to put themselves in mortal danger, to “stand up and be counted”, to act contrary to self-interest.

But it is not just saints and heroes that talk of conscience, conscience has been cited by the most repugnant and morally abhorrent people who have ever lived, racists, murderers, tyrants, dictators. For example as Bettina Stangneth’s states in *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*,<sup>3</sup> a discussion of the inner life of one of the Nazi’s most notorious officers: “Conscience was simply the ‘morality of the Fatherland that dwells within’ a person, which Eichmann also termed ‘the voice of the blood’”.

Conscience can be male or female or both or neither, it can be one voice or many, it can echo religious ideas, social ideas, racist ideas, lofty ideas or ideas found in the filth of human corruption. Conscience can develop at any particular age and dissipates at any age. It does not “speak”, and it does “speak”, and does not have a language of choice. All of these observations then leave a number of observations and questions.

There seem to be (at least) three related functions that we think the conscience plays. First, it tells us what we ought to do as a guide for our lives. Second, it is a source of moral knowledge. That is, we might say “I know that stealing a pen is wrong because my conscience told me”. Third it might be thought of as a motivation. That is, it might be the thing that actually gets us up out of our seat to act in certain ways, even when things are difficult or even life threatening.

Just to clarify, we can see the difference in the first two of these functions if we think of a tyrant who says for example: “my conscience tells me I have to kill all mentally ill people to help the country”. Clearly this is a case where her conscience is telling her how she ought to behave. But, given that we think that killing the mentally ill is morally wrong, we do not want to say that in this case her conscience gives her knowledge of what is right and wrong. So it might be true that the conscience gives us guidance but not knowledge.

Equally the opposite seems true, that we might know what is right and wrong yet fail to be guided to do it. This predicament is what Shakespeare captured in this famous quotation: “conscience doth make cowards of us all” (Hamlet 3.1.78–82).

Consider another point. Conscience is subjective in that it is about one reflecting inwards on oneself, on how one might “feel” about certain things. It is not about looking out into the world, at a set of rules or laws. We experience the conscience differently than we would if a friend, priest, politician or Imam was telling us what to do. Of course, although conscience is “inward looking”, that is not the same as saying that we just make up what the conscience allegedly tells us. For instance, we might think that what is right and wrong is dependent on God but also think that we come to know what is right and wrong through our conscience.

Finally it is worth noting that the term “conscience” was only formalized in its modern moral meaning in the mid eighteenth century (e.g. neither Plato nor Aristotle talk of conscience).

However, note that just because a term is modern, or just because there is disagreement with how a term is used, that does not mean that the ideas themselves are new.

Consider the point that the terms “molecules” and “atoms” were recent inventions, and that in their development they might be used to talk about different things, and they engendered disagreement within the scientific community. This in itself does not lead us to the conclusion that there are no molecules and no atoms. So the lack of term “conscience”, and disagreement about what “conscience” means does not mean that conscience is merely an “invention”. With all these points in mind let’s consider one of the key thinkers in relation to conscience, Aquinas.

### 3. AQUINAS ON CONSCIENCE

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If you recall, Aquinas developed a Natural Law theology. The basic idea is that through reason (what he calls *ratio*) we can come to recognize certain precepts that we ought to live by. Aquinas thinks that this reliance on thinking and reflection is revealed in the Bible:

They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.<sup>4</sup>

Notice then that for Paul — and Aquinas — the “conscience” bears witness sometimes accusing the person, sometimes defending them. For Aquinas conscience is morally neutral, it simply “bears witness”, it is a “sign-post” and after all signposts do not opinions on things (see Aquinas, *Summa*, Part 1, Question 79, Article 13).

To be clear then Aquinas did not take conscience to be a source of moral knowledge but as a guide. This means that Aquinas, unlike Luther and post-reformation thinkers, took conscience to be fallible. For Aquinas we may be wrong in following our conscience as it can move us in the wrong direction/mislead us

For Aquinas the conscience is the act of applying the universal principles (the Eternal/Divine law) to actual real life situations.

Aquinas explicitly defines “conscience” as the “application of knowledge to activity” (*Summa Theologica*, I-II, I). So, if conscience for Aquinas is about the application of knowledge to activity, this raises the question how we get this knowledge? This is where another key technical term is introduced. The *synderesis*. *Synderesis* is not the same as conscience but is the innate ability of the mind — what he calls a habit of the mind — to apprehend the eternal/divine laws. The role of conscience is to apply the primary precepts discovered as the content of *synderesis*.

To get a better understanding of *synderesis* consider someone trying to work out the quickest way to get between two points. Through rational reflection they will see that it is the straight line. This “coming to recognize through reflection” is what Aquinas has in mind when he talks about *synderesis*. For Aquinas, unlike conscience, *synderesis* is never mistaken. Humans do wrong, thinks Aquinas, when conscience (and not *synderesis*) makes a mistake. This means that a failure of conscience needs to be clearly thought through on Aquinas’s account.

For Aquinas, conscience errs because of ignorance about how to apply the eternal/divine laws, of which there are two types. Ignorance that can be overcome by using one’s reason (*vincible ignorance*), and ignorance that cannot be overcome by using one’s reason (*invincible ignorance*). *Invincible ignorance* is doing something wrong when one could not have known better; *vincible ignorance* is doing wrong when one ought to have known better. But how might this relate to conscience?

Imagine two people going into a gun shop. The first person has no criminal record, has never been in trouble with the police nor at school and they have no record of mental illness. He is, for all intents and purposes, a model citizen. This person buys a gun and goes on a killing rampage. The owner of the shop, by following her conscience, has not done something morally wrong because her

ignorance is invincible; there was no indication that this would have been a likely outcome.

This contrasts to the person who is sold a gun even though he has a violent criminal record which would have shown up on a basic background check. In this case, the owner of the gun shop following her conscience has done something morally wrong because in this case her ignorance is vincible.

To conclude, Aquinas thinks all of us can know infallibly what is right and wrong through synderesis. However, even though we are infallible about this, we can, and do, make mistakes in applying this knowledge. It is our conscience (*conscientia*) which tells us how to apply this knowledge and moves us to act. It can go wrong through ignorance. Ignorance which could have been avoided (*vincible*) means our action is morally wrong. Mistakes deriving from ignorance we could not have avoided (*invincible*) means our action is not morally wrong.

In the next section, we will consider what Freud has to say about conscience, and explain how he re-conceptualizes it as a psychological and not theological concept, and in doing so argues we should not accept it as an inherently good notion.

#### 4. FREUD AND THE CONSCIENCE

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Freud is best known as a psychologist and the architect of psychoanalysis. He is controversial and most philosophers and psychologists reject the ideas he presents. However, his ideas have been incredibly influential, and indeed his name has entered our everyday talk in the form of a “Freudian slip”. Among Freud’s many ideas his conceptualization of the structure of the mind is key to his views on conscience. He thinks the mind can be thought of as containing three parts: the id, the ego and the super-ego. Freud’s account of conscience is understood as the relation between these.

For Freud the id is the collection of our primal drives, e.g. the basic desires for food, sex, drink and is the oldest part of the mind.

The id cannot be properly formalized or understood and Freud likens it to chaos. It is instinctive, emotional and illogical. We cannot list all the drives that make up the id as they are inaccessible to us. Freud has a nice way of describing the id; he calls it: "...a cauldron full of seething excitations...". (SE, XXII.73). Although we can say very little about the content of the id, Freud did think that there was a general principle to help us understand the drives in the id, what he calls the "pleasure principle". This is the claim that what identifies and unifies the drives of the id is the avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure.

Now, as a very young child it may be OK to be driven by the pleasure principle; they crawl single-mindedly after the chocolate buttons to put in their mouth, they crave their mother's milk irrespective of anything else. However, as we develop we soon realize that we cannot simply act on the primal instincts of the id as we have to navigate ourselves in the social spaces we inhabit! We have to understand boundaries, sanctions and consequences. To successfully operate in the world, we need to consciously reflect and reason and ultimately, we have to delay instinctive behavior and "weigh-up" the situation. Put bluntly someone whose id is unchecked would cease to be acceptable in society and find themselves physically, socially and emotionally isolated. It is what Freud calls the "ego" which plays this policing role.

But if we only have the id and the ego then it is unclear why we would not simply follow the pleasure principle. That is, although the ego rationally reflects, it needs something to weigh-up against the id. We need some authority that monitors what the ego is doing. This authority is what Freud calls the super-ego.

Early in our life our parents (as well as society, religious leaders etc.) tell us what we can and cannot do and chastise us for breaking rules, and as we grow older we internalize these things and "hear them" as a voice of authority. Imagine that your mum has always told you not to sit with your elbows on the table then you internalize this rule. So when you are much older and not living

with your mum any longer the voice of your “super-ego” speaks with authority — “take your elbows off the table!” These are the very basics of Freud structure of the mind. Our ego balances the primal drives of the id with the voice of authority from the super-ego.

Where does the conscience come in? For Freud the conscience is the form that the super-ego takes in addressing the ego. When the internalized authority derived from parental (social/religious) rules and regulations controls the ego it is understood as “the conscience”. In our last example it is our “conscience” that tells us to remove our elbows from the table.

Notice then that our conscience often requires certain things from us which we fail to achieve and this gives rise to guilt. For Freud, the conscience can be thought of as synonymous with the “guilty conscience”. Our ego is punished through guilt by the form of the super-ego we call conscience. Furthermore, Freud says that when the super-ego fails to deal properly with the id — when the pleasure principle is repressed — this forms what he calls neurosis.

You can also hopefully see the differences between Aquinas and Freud. First, the obvious point is that for Freud the conscience is not the voice of God. Second, unlike Aquinas, Freud thinks that the conscience could be bad, destructive and unhelpful. The conscience is the way the ego experiences the authority of the super-ego. But the super-ego is arrived at through the experiences we have. And, of course, we might have had really bad experiences growing up where parents are stifling, overly authoritarian, distant, cold, hard, violent, abusive etc. In these sorts of cases the conscience would be stifling, overly authoritarian, distant, etc. This means that although Freud does not think we can, or should, get rid of the conscience he does think we should treat it with a healthy dose of skepticism and hence not be kowtowed by the “guilt” that is our ego’s punishment for falling short of the super-ego; conscience is the product of our often non-ideal upbringing rather than a divinely-inspired force for good.



## 5. FREUD'S PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY

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Psychosexual Development Theory is a theory of sexual development from birth to death. Freud was the first thinker to look at the entire lifespan in terms of development. Freud thought that as we develop we move through different stages. At each stage our libido (sex drive) is focused towards different things. If we fail to move through a stage completely, or return to a stage, then problems arise and we might become fixated with the area associated with that stage. This can be a serious problem for our relationships and could be an underlying cause of mental illness.

The first stage is the oral stage from birth to about one and a half. This stage is where babies get pleasure through putting things in their mouth, pleasure in biting, chewing and sucking. For example, babies soon after they are born are breastfeeding and as the baby develops they navigate and explore the world through putting things in their mouth. Notice that during this phase babies are very dependent on others. According to Freud at this stage not only do we get information about the world, but we also fulfil the id. Babies who can bite, chew and such as much as they want are being guided by the id. Freud explains behaviors like smoking, chewing gum, overeating, with failure to move properly through this stage which prevented the successful development of the id.

The next stage, from about one and a half to three years, is the anal stage. Here pleasure is gained through controlling going to the toilet. This stage is about gaining control of one's body, and it starts with controlling the bladder and bowels (being potty trained). It is around this time that the ego develops. This control of their bodies is a source of pride and pleasure for children. Agents who fail to properly move through this stage are what are sometimes called "anally retentive". That is, someone who is overly controlling or out of control and messy, because — according to Freud — they do not want to let go of their waste, or do not care where or when they let go of their waste.

The next phase of development, from about three to six years, is the phallic stage in which a child discovers one's genitals, and importantly that they are different in men and women. This stage is where Freud thinks we develop the Oedipus and the Electra complex. A problematic phallic stage will cause problems with intimacy in later life.

The next stage, the latency stage, is from six years to the onset of puberty. This stage is not about pleasure in the body as the libido is "latent" or hidden — this is the stage where sexual desire is repressed and no new sexual desires emerge. At this stage girls play with girls in order to learn the role of a girl and boys play with boys in order to learn about the role of boys.. The child learns how to navigate the social world. A difficult latency stage leads to relational problems and understanding one's gender.

The libido then reappears in the final stage which lasts to our death and which Freud calls the mature genital stage. This is where the individual not only recognizes the difference between men and women but also shows a desire to engage in a sexual relationship and, more generally, a pursuit of pleasure and happiness. People become sexually active, fall in love and get married. This is the stage where we acquire a fully developed conscience.

## SUMMARY

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The notion of "conscience" has appeared for thousands of years in different cultures, even though it has not always been called "conscience". Modern Christian orthodoxy popularized it and characterized it in relation to God's voice, and guidance. Aquinas thought that conscience is the way we understand how to apply what we know. In Aquinas's view, our conscience is fallible and might guide us wrongly. When our conscience "gets it wrong" we can be either culpable — through vincible ignorance — or not culpable — through invincible ignorance.

Freud is less convinced that conscience is a force for good, and

he is certain that it has not got anything to do with God. For Freud conscience can be either a good or bad. We can think of our mind as having three parts, the id, ego and super-ego. The conscience for Freud is the form the super-ego takes when it is trying to keep the ego in line. It is internalized as the voice of authority. The super-ego is about following rules but those rules do not come from “on high”, they derive from the upbringing we have had. So if we have had a repressive upbringing then the super-ego — the voice of conscience — will be repressive. How we develop these three features of the mind is through what Freud calls Psychosexual Development; if we do not develop correctly then we become fixated and repressive, form a neurosis and ultimately become mentally ill. Freud thought that this could be avoided by working through the Psychosexual Stages in the normal way, and can be treated through psychosexual counselling.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Pleasure principle

Id

Ego

Super-ego

Synderesis

Vincible ignorance

Invincible ignorance

Psychosexual Development Theory (oral, anal, phallic, latency and mature genital phases)

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1 See P. Strohm, *Conscience*, p. 18, for a good overview of this.

2 M. L. King Jr., 'A Proper Sense of Priorities', [http://www.aavw.org/special\\_features/speeches\\_speech\\_king04.html](http://www.aavw.org/special_features/speeches_speech_king04.html)

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## Stealing

## STEALING



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## 1. STEALING: INTRODUCTION

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The Bible reference above is absolutist in nature. It does not say that you should not steal so long as you have enough resources available to you, or that you should not steal if your neighbor has been good to you. Rather, it simply says that you should not steal full stop. Partly as a result of this particular commandment and the impact of Christianity upon social custom in many parts of the world, the message that stealing is a moral wrong is pervasive and fairly uncontroversial, at least *prima facie*. For example, if you hear that someone has been sent to prison for stealing, it would likely take something atypical for you to question whether or not the person deserved punishment for his or her crime. In this chapter, we apply the key normative theories of Kantian Ethics, Utilitarianism and Virtue Ethics to the issue of stealing.

## 2. DEFINING STEALING

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Beginning a chapter on the ethics of stealing, it is important to make clear exactly what “stealing” amounts to. At first, this may seem like a fairly simple task; stealing is just the taking of another person’s property without their consent. Indeed, if reality television programs following British Traffic Police are anything to go by, this definition is of use not merely for philosophy classes, but for the real world also; theft of vehicles is often categorized as an example of TWOC — “taking without owners’ consent”.

Yet, it is not always clear that stealing comfortably fits this definition. For example, we might wonder if it is possible to steal an item even though the owner has given you consent to take it. The original definition would rule this out as a conceptual impossibility, but consider someone who, whilst inebriated (perhaps even drugged against their will), gives you permission to take an item of value from their house. Even though you have their explicit

permission, acting on this verbal instruction and stealing their television still might seem to be an act of theft.

As a second counterexample to the original definition, imagine that you are better at cards than someone else, although you hide this fact from them. If you play a game for real money, and beat them in hand after hand after hand, might it be suggested that you have stolen their money even though they freely entered into the game?

There are responses to these two examples, of course. We might deny that either is an act of stealing, or deny that proper consent was ever given — this seems particularly compelling in the first example. However, we can also cast doubt on the definition by focusing not on the issue of consent, but on the idea of property. For example, if a person is being paid by the hour, but spends an undue amount of time on social media or checking sports scores, have they stolen money or time from their employer? Or, as a second possible example, if I make up a joke that is then retold by someone else, have they stolen “property” without my consent? This is a genuinely important issue in the field of comedy, for example. Again, the original definition might be defensible as a mechanism for capturing such instances of stealing. However, if it is defensible, it is only because of a broad reading of the idea of property, taking the concept far beyond the physical.

Finally, consider the example of someone who fails to pay their legally due portion of tax to the government. Again, we might wonder if this person has “stolen” money just by refusing to hand over their financial property. If so, our reading of the original definition of stealing would again need to be rather broad.

All of this has hopefully opened your minds to the variety of acts that may or may not be labelled as stealing. We will proceed in this chapter with the rough understanding of stealing provided at the start of this section, but with a broad and liberal interpretation of both “property” and “consent”.

### 3. KANTIAN ETHICS ON STEALING

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We outlined the structure of Kantian Ethics, named after its creator Immanuel Kant. It would be best to refresh your understanding of Kantian Ethics before considering the application of Kantian thinking to the issue of stealing in this section. Background knowledge of this theory is therefore assumed in what follows.

To determine whether an act is morally permissible (acceptable) or not, we can utilize two formulations of the Kantian Categorical Imperative. According to the first formulation, if we consider the maxim behind an action (the general principle that supports the action in the mind of the person acting), then we should consider whether or not that maxim could be willed to become a universal law. According to the second formulation, we should consider whether or not the action involves treating another person merely as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves.

To consider what guidance Kantian Ethics would provide regarding stealing, let us first take an example of stealing where the question of whether it seems possible that it might be morally acceptable can apparently be answered uncontroversially with a “no”. Consider a person who steals a toy from a child when their parent’s back is turned. The thief, in this case, seems to act on the maxim “take the property of others whenever you please”. It seems that we could not will this maxim to become a universal law, because if everyone took the property of others whenever they pleased, then whole concept of property would break down. Thus, such a maxim could not be universalized without contradiction (much like the example of breaking promises). The reason for the breakdown of the concept of “property” in this case is clear if we think about the idea of “ownership”. If anyone can take any object whenever they want, then no one can truly be said to own anything. For example, if I could (without moral condemnation) take the pen out of your hand on the basis of the universalized maxim as



described above, then there is a clear sense in which you might have been holding the pen without ever owning the pen.

Indeed, not only does the act of theft as described fail against the first formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative, it also fails against the second formulation. If you steal from the child, then you are quite clearly not treating the child (or the person caring for the child) as a free and rational agent with their own dignity; on the contrary you are using them merely as a means to your own end of securing property that you desire.

That Kantian Ethics speaks against the moral permissibility of stealing toys from children should be no surprise — any theory that did not speak against such actions would likely be in trouble. However, the structure of the Kantian response to this case is what really matters, for it is a structure that we can apply to other cases. Take an example of stealing that is plausibly moral defensible, perhaps involving stealing from a financially powerful and internationally influential supermarket chain in order to feed your hungry family. The Kantian view regarding this case will be informative as to the wider response of Kantian Ethics to stealing.

In this new example, the maxim behind the action might be thought to be "take the property of others only when it is necessary for survival" (putting this example into the most extreme and therefore plausibly morally defensible form that we can). Can this maxim be willed to be a universal law? Well, even as it stands, there are reasons for thinking that such a maxim could not be universalized. For one, food is always strictly necessary for our survival, along with water, medical treatment and, in the modern age, some financial resource. Indeed, even someone who burgles a house to steal a television might act on such a maxim if they plan on selling that television in order to pay a debt to a potentially violent individual. The breadth of such a universalized maxim thus brings us back to the issue that afflicted the previous maxim, and the concept of property may not survive universalization of such a maxim.

Still, even in referring to the maxim in the more specific form of “take the property of others only when it is necessary for survival”, it might be suggested that we are venturing away from the approach with which Kant would be happy. Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–) has suggested that when it comes to applying the test of universalization the system can be manipulated by being overly specific with the maxim. He says:

All I need to do is to characterize the proposed action in such a way that the maxim will permit me to do what I want while prohibiting others from doing what would nullify the action if universalized.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, on this view, I apparently could universalize the maxim “take bread from a financially powerful supermarket only when you or immediate family members are at the point of starvation”. Indeed, less desirably, I seemingly could universalize the maxim “People with my fingerprint can steal from a shop whenever they feel hungry”, since there would be nothing contradictory in this becoming a universal law; the concept of property would not break down if only I could steal things I desired. However, there is a question — as referred to in Kantian Ethics when this formulation of the Categorical Imperative was explained in more detail — as to whether or not a maxim of this type could be understood as a universal law. This is because its application would clearly not be universal in the sense that it would apply only to me or, in the case of the first maxim of this paragraph, to a limited number of desperate people. This, therefore, forms the basis of a response that the Kantian can offer to the MacIntyre-style worry.

Indeed, the maxim universalized must also be the maxim acted upon, so, just because it might be the case that we could attempt to universalize a maxim of the form “take bread from a financially powerful supermarket only when you or your immediate family members are at the point of starvation” (as per the MacIntyre approach), this would not help someone who actually acts on the maxim “steal food when hungry”, but tries to cover this maxim up

with more dramatic language. Thus, even if the MacIntyre criticism has some bite to it, this will still cover only a very small number of instances of possible theft; moral assessment must be of actual maxims motivating behavior, not reinterpreted maxims described as favorably as possible.

What is more complex in this example of stealing from the internationally owned and financially powerful supermarket is the question as to whether or not it involves the use of another person merely as a means to an end, thereby denying them their fundamental human dignity as a rational agent. In this case of stealing from a supermarket — an act sometimes referred to as a “victimless crime” — it is not immediately clear who might be being used merely as a means to an end. Is it the management of the supermarket? Is it the shareholders? Is it the shelf-stacking staff? Is it the security personnel on site? If stealing from a sole trader, this issue would not arise. However, it is far more complex in the modern context of large supermarkets. Working through specific instances of stealing, perhaps with real case studies, and seeing if those examples could escape falling foul of the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, would be useful for you to consider for yourselves.

#### 4. ACT AND PREFERENCE UTILITARIANISM ON STEALING

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Utilitarian theories — Act, Rule, and Preference — are linked by their commitment to the view that it is consequence that determines the morality of actions, although the three theories have slightly different views on how this central claim should be interpreted in practice. Rule Utilitarianism and the ideas of John Stuart Mill will be discussed in section five of this chapter; for now our attention is focused upon the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and Peter Singer as defenders of Act Utilitarianism and Preference Utilitarianism respectively.

The teleological, consequentialist and relativistic nature of

Utilitarianism may seem to make it more open to the idea that examples of stealing will sometimes be morally acceptable. This is because all that needs to be the case for an example of stealing to be morally right is for the good consequences to outweigh the bad consequences. Indeed, this very much seems to be the case in the example of a person stealing bread from a multinational supermarket chain in order to survive. Thus, the key issue for Act and Preference Utilitarianism when it comes to stealing is not “can stealing ever be justified” (this was the key question facing Kantian Ethics) but rather “does Utilitarianism justify stealing in too many cases”.

Consider the following situations:

1. James has two children who are desperate for a particular Christmas present. If he steals the present, which he cannot afford to buy, from a major international retailer then this action would very likely lead to far more pleasure for his children than pain for the company.
2. Matthew can illegally download a music album that he would greatly enjoy, saving himself money in doing so. Or, he can pay full price for the music and allow his money to line the pockets of an international pop star, her record label and a financially powerful music retailer. In this case, more pleasure would seem to be produced by an illegal download rather than a paid-for download.
3. A gang of thieves has the ability to steal \$1 from every bank account in the world. The pain of losing \$1, even when multiplied an extremely large number of times, is minimal. However, the theft would make the thieves rich beyond their wildest dreams, filling their lives with extreme pleasure.
4. A football club requires a large donation in order to keep running its youth teams and providing pleasure for

hundreds of children in the local area. Imogen, a fan of the club, breaks into the mansion of a millionaire and steals \$10,000 worth of property to sell in order to raise the necessary funds to save the youth program. If the goods stolen were of trivial importance to the millionaire, the balance of pleasure versus pain may favor the theft.

5. Bryony and Robert are going to miss a concert that they have been looking forward to for a very long time because their car has broken down. By chance, they notice an unlocked car parked on a driveway near them. If they steal the car, attend the concert, refill it with petrol and park it back on the driveway — all without the owner's knowledge — then their action appears to provide them with a great deal of pleasure and no pain at all to the actual owner of the car.

In all five cases as described (and we should not cheat and change the examples!) the Benthamite, hedonistic act utilitarian would seem to be forced to suggest that stealing would be morally right; indeed, not stealing may well be morally wrong in all of these cases because not stealing would fail to create the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. If we replace “pleasure” with “preference satisfaction” in the five cases, the situations do not seem to be different in any key respects, and so the preference utilitarian would seem to face the same issue.

In response, we should pay attention to Bentham's suggestion that act utilitarians would have “rules of thumb” that provide general guidance against stealing. We are better off being disposed not to steal, for example, because we cannot be sure of the consequences.

If James, for example, was caught then far more pain would result from his action than pleasure might have been generated if successful. Indeed, in the real world, thieves often have no idea what pain their victims suffer as stolen items can often have hidden

sentimental value beyond any that a thief could recognize in the abstract (this seems most relevant to cases four and five). The thief who stole an iPad in Colorado Springs, for example, probably did not factor in the pain of an eight-year-old boy losing photos of himself with his recently deceased father.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even when we might think an individual act of stealing will produce the maximum amount of pleasure in a given situation, we should be wary of over-confidence in our analysis, and not downplay the painful consequences associated with that possible action.

As an objection, it can be asked whether or not such “rules of thumb” are enough to save the utilitarian from being overly promiscuous in terms of allowing morally justified stealing. There is good reason for thinking that Utilitarianism does not offer enough in respect of cautioning against stealing in general. Although stealing may be viewed as undesirable in some of the previous situations (and similar such cases) for the reason alluded to in the previous paragraph pertaining to rules of thumb, there are plenty of situations where the consequences obviously point to stealing if total pleasure or preference satisfaction is all that determines morality. We are sure that you can imagine many such situations yourselves where consequences are relatively easy to predict. There may be a difference between wanting to be less than absolutist about the wrongness of stealing, and being so liberal that stealing turns out to be morally required in a potentially enormous number of situations.

Act and preference utilitarians may make their final stand on this issue by suggesting that greater attention should be paid to the psychological costs associated with stealing. The pain of a victim will not be fully accounted for if we only think of immediate pains to do with finance and anger. In addition, we must recognize the psychological pain often resulting from the fear of having property stolen or a house burgled. This psychological distress may be so severe that it outweighs even large-scale pleasures resulting from the theft. In addition, it might be the case that engaging in an act of

stealing in one potentially morally justifiable situation would make someone more prone to stealing in a second, or third or fourth situation where moral legitimacy is either more questionable or obviously not present.

Perhaps if one becomes comfortable with stealing and therefore less empathetic as a result, then the long-term costs of stealing — as they pertain to the character and future actions of the perpetrator — may be far higher than originally thought. This idea has much in common with Kant's indirect concern for animals.

Whatever your views on Act and Preference Utilitarianism as they impact the issue of stealing, it will be well worth your while coming up with your own examples and then applying the theories to those cases in order to make clear that you understand, and can defend, the scope of cases in which utilitarians would morally criticize or morally support stealing.

## 5. RULE UTILITARIANISM ON STEALING

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If you find yourself wishing to defend Utilitarianism, but are left uninspired by the extent to which Act Utilitarianism and Preference Utilitarianism can speak against instances of stealing, then Rule Utilitarianism may provide you with reason for optimism. As a reminder, the rule utilitarian suggests that moral action is action that would be recommended by the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest good for the greatest number. On initial viewing, it might seem that a rule banning stealing would be a good candidate to be included in the set of rules that would produce the greatest good for the greatest number, especially given the potential psychological costs associated with stealing as described above.

Indeed, if we think more broadly about the “best set of rules”, then it might seem likely that there would be a rule requiring adequate provision of food for those hungry or lacking resources, and a similar rule regarding provision of medical treatment and

housing etc. Such provision would not be free, of course, but the best set of rules would very likely include provision for collecting adequate taxation, given that a pound spent on someone in distress is likely to facilitate greater future happiness than a pound spent by someone economically comfortable (though we encourage you to consider this idea in more depth, perhaps with your own examples).

Despite the previous ideas, it may be suggested that the best set of rules would allow for stealing “when necessary” and thus discriminate between “good” stealing and “bad” stealing in a way that satisfies the non-absolutist. How easy it would be to write such a rule that is consistent with promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number, yet does not “get it wrong” with individual instances of stealing and their moral status, is something that you again should find it useful to consider. Here, it will be worth revisiting the distinction between Strong Rule Utilitarianism and Weak Rule Utilitarianism,

Finally, it is worth considering the impact of a style of “demandingness” objection as it pertains to applying Rule Utilitarianism in the context of stealing. Recall Mill’s harm principle:

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.<sup>4</sup>

If the harm principle informs rules in the set that promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number, then there would be no rule allowing people to take assets from private individuals in order to redistribute resources for the purpose of promoting happiness. A useful example to have in mind would be of jewels stored in a safety deposit box in perpetuity, when those jewels could be used in ways that would promote greater levels of happiness if stolen and sold. Such action — which seems to have the appearance of stealing from private individuals for the greater good in the style of Robin Hood — would not appear to sit neatly



with Mill's own harm principle. At the very least, it would need a particularly interesting interpretation of the notion of preventing harm to others.

This entire issue in itself highlights the difficulty of actually fixing the rules by which the rule utilitarian wants us to judge specific actions in our minds, and this also raises another problem for the rule utilitarian in respect of the difficulty of practically applying the theory to stealing. It might be useful to return to cases 1–5 as outlined in section four and ask yourself what the rule utilitarian would suggest in those cases — does the answer of the rule utilitarian put them in a more or less attractive position than the answers of the act and preference utilitarians?

## 6. VIRTUE ETHICS ON STEALING

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As a normative moral theory, Aristotelian Virtue Ethics was explored and, as with all of the theories discussed in this chapter, it is important to read everything here in the light of issues raised there.

The virtue ethicist is not interested in the moral status of individual actions, but rather is interested in the character traits and dispositions of the person performing those actions. Using reason to work out the virtuous Golden Mean in the different spheres of life, Aristotle suggested the following as virtuous and non-virtuous (vice) character traits.

| Feeling/<br>Emotion | Vice of Deficiency | Virtuous Disposition (Golden<br>Mean) | Vice of Excess           |
|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Anger               | Lack of spirit     | Patience                              | Irascibility             |
| Shame               | Shyness            | Modesty                               | Shamefulness             |
| Fear                | Cowardice          | Courage                               | Rashness                 |
| Indignation         | Spitefulness       | Righteousness                         | Envy                     |
| Situation           |                    |                                       |                          |
| Social conduct      | Cantankerousness   | Friendliness                          | Self-serving<br>flattery |
| Conversation        | Boorishness        | Wittiness                             | Buffoonery               |
| Giving money        | Stinginess         | Generosity                            | Profligacy               |

Thus, those who engage in the act of stealing on the basis of righteousness, courage and virtuous patience may be considered moral, whereas those who engage in the act of stealing on the basis of rashness, shamefulness and irascibility will not be considered moral. This reveals something interesting about the application of Virtue Ethics to stealing. According to Virtue Ethics, the very same act, performed by two different people, can be viewed differently from a moral perspective.

Take the act of stealing a loaf of bread from a supermarket, and then passing that loaf to a hungry and homeless woman on the street nearby. If a person commits this act out of self-serving flattery, then they act in accordance with a vice of excess. Yet, if someone else commits the very same act of stealing, but does so on the basis of righteousness and generosity, then they act in a virtuous way. This example is over-simplified, but the point is hopefully clear.

One of the bigger worries regarding Virtue Ethics is its lack of specific guidance, and this worry would seem to be at its most acute when it comes to seeking advice from Virtue Ethics over an applied ethical issue such as stealing. After all, how are we to determine if our stealing a loaf of bread would be based on righteous and generous character dispositions, or reflect rashness

and self-serving flattery? How can we ascertain what the virtuous course of action would be in a specific situation?

One possibility is to look to the actions of virtuous people for guidance, but this raises the troubling issue of subjectivity. For example, if I view St. Augustine as virtuous, then I may view his complete aversion to stealing as representative of the Golden Mean. Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) says of Augustine that:

It appears that, with some companions of his own age, he despoiled a neighbor's pear tree, although he was not hungry, and his parents had better pears at home. He continued throughout his life to consider this an act of almost incredible wickedness. It would not have been so bad if he had been hungry, or had no other means of getting pears; but, as it was, the act was one of pure mischief, inspired by the love of wickedness for its own sake.<sup>5</sup>

Stealing for petty reasons looks to be the height of non-virtuous behavior. However, if I view the fictional character Robin Hood as the paradigm of a virtuous person because of his willingness to steal from the rich in order to give to the poor, then I may have a different view as to which actions the virtuous character trait of generosity would give rise to. Or, more extremely, if I view a famous fictional pirate of the high seas as representing a virtuous individual, my views would once more be different; how do we decide which of these people are the right people to seek virtuous guidance from when it comes to stealing? Aristotle can refer to practical reason (*phronesis*) and human flourishing, but this may be a serious weakness.

In addition, we might wonder how to act when virtues themselves seem to clash, as well as when the advice of possible virtuous people also seems to clash. An act of stealing might seem to be both courageous and self-serving, or both brave and rash. Resolving how to act requires use of practical reason, but again this language might be thought unhelpful by the critic of Virtue Ethics as it is still being unhelpfully vague.

## 7. METAETHICS AND STEALING

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AQA require you to understand how the various metaethical theories might be applied to the applied ethical issues on the specification, of which stealing is the first we have considered. Below, assuming some grasp of the theories, we offer guidance as to how metaethical theories might relate to this issue. Much of the guidance below is easily applicable to the other applied ethical issues also discussed in the remaining three chapters.

### Cognitivism and Realism

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The combination of Cognitivism and Realism in this area would entail that moral claims about stealing are truth-apt propositions, expressing beliefs that will be made true by genuinely existing moral properties at least some of the time. For the utilitarian, moral claims regarding the ethical acceptability of individual actions will be made true by natural properties such as pleasure, happiness or preference satisfaction. For the intuitionist, the non-natural property of goodness will make some of our moral claims regarding stealing true.

### Cognitivism and Anti-Realism

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The moral error theorist believes that our moral claims regarding the ethics of stealing are intended to be true, but can never achieve truth because no moral properties exist as truth-makers for those moral claims. Importantly, just because the moral error theorist cannot endorse the claim that “stealing can be morally wrong at least sometimes”, this does not entail a love of stealing on their part. The moral error theorist may have a non-moral reason for opposing stealing on many occasions, or indeed supporting stealing on other occasions. Moral reasons are not the only reasons not to engage in stealing, as legal and social/personal reasons will

also be a factor as they often speak against the wisdom of theft. Moral error theorists who care about the property rights of others, for example, may well strongly oppose stealing.

### Non-Cognitivism and Anti-Realism

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According to the simple non-cognitivist considered in this book, our moral utterances regarding stealing are not truth-apt because they are not expressions of belief; they are expressions of emotion or other non-truth-apt attitudes such as approval or disapproval. Thus, according to theories such as Emotivism and Prescriptivism, a phrase such as “stealing is wrong” expresses a negative emotional attitude towards stealing (Emotivism) or makes it clear that we do not want people to steal (Prescriptivism).

Whichever non-cognitivist theory you prefer, the non-cognitivist position is defined by the commitment to the idea that the moral utterances do not reveal something true about the world and do not even try to describe features of the world.

Therefore, we cannot criticize a thief as morally wrong when using this argument (something akin to the claim of the moral error theorist). However, if we adopt Prescriptivism, we might at least be able to criticize the thief for inconsistency if she speaks of the general wrongness of stealing whilst defending the rightness of stealing in her case. Despite this, one big worry for those interested in adopting a view like Emotivism or Prescriptivism is that it cheapens and eliminates the value of moral debate over the moral rightness of stealing, since we cannot defend our ethical claims as being genuinely true or false in the way that realists seek to do and in the way that most people would wish to.

### SUMMARY

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Many will want to avoid an absolute moral view regarding the unacceptability of stealing, the kind of view that Kant might be

thought to defend. Neither Utilitarianism nor Virtue Ethics offer an absolute prohibition against stealing, but each has their own problems. In terms of showing your understanding of these issues, applying normative theories to your own variety of cases is a tactic that may best enable you to write with confidence about the various nuanced issues afflicting each theory.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Categorical Imperative

Universalisation

Truth-apt

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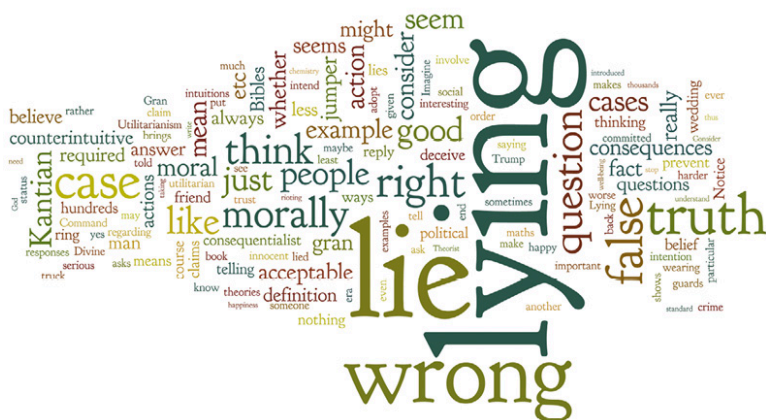
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## Telling Lies

## TELLING LIES



## Friedrich Nietzsche



## 1. INTRODUCTION

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What is it to tell a lie? Is it always wrong to tell lies? Is it sometimes acceptable to lie, and if so, what are the conditions that make it OK? Humans have dealt with these types of questions, regarding lies and truth, ever since they began to interact with one another. Truth and trust are key to the working of our society, in fact people who are caught in a lie are sanctioned, blamed and punished. We have many examples of politicians being brought down by lies; Nixon and the ensuing Watergate is a good one (although see the final section regarding Politicians). Children are told “not to lie”, religious leaders and religious texts condemn lying, relationship guidance talks about the importance of not lying to your partner etc. We will start to consider some of these questions and apply some of the thinking thus far discussed in the book to lying.

## 2. WHAT IS IT TO LIE?

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Let’s consider some examples; when you read them you should ask yourself whether there is a lie involved.

1. A friend asks you where you went on holiday last year. You say “Cambridge”, which they understand to be Cambridge, UK, but you really mean Cambridge, Massachusetts.
2. You are teaching chemistry to primary school children and you hold up a football and say “Atoms are just like this...”
3. You are having a really bad day: your partner has split up with you, you have lost your house keys, and your friend just shouted at you. You meet an acquaintance in the corridor; they say, “how are you?” You say, “fine thanks, and you?”.

4. Your gran has saved up her pension, bought some wool, and knitted you a jumper. You hate it. She is visiting you and you put it on. She asks, smiling, “so, do you really like it?” You reply, “of course Gran, thanks so much for thinking about me”.
5. You are taking a math test and one question asks the solution to  $\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x$ . You write “10” [the answer is “1”].
6. A recent divorcee keeps wearing his wedding ring.
7. You are smuggling Bibles into China. At the border, the guards ask you what you have in your truck. As it happens, you have hundreds of Bibles, so you say “oh, hundreds of Bibles”. The guards think this is a joke and wave you through.

So what do you think? Are these cases of lying or not? Let’s take them in turn.

(1) This does not fall into the category of lying as there was no intent on your part to mislead your friend.

(2) Is harder. Strictly speaking atoms are nothing like footballs; they are, for example, mostly space. And as Kirsten Walsh and Adrian Currie<sup>1</sup> state “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, is no teacher’s maxim”. This is because it is simply impossible to go into all the details of science or history, or chemistry etc. But does this mean that you are lying to the class? We think the answer is “yes” and in fact all teaching involves lying. Of course, whether this is right or wrong is something that we’ll return to below.

(3) Arguably this would not be categorized as lying as the reply given is generally considered to be a standard answer to a standard question; the questioner would be expecting this reply in most circumstances.

(4) This does seem as if it is a clear case of lying. Having been asked a direct question by your gran, you look her in the eye and lie. Now whether this is wrong is something we consider below; it

would seem that it is precisely for cases such as this that we have the phrase “little white lie”.

(5) This does not seem to be a case of lying, rather just bad math. It is certainly false but there is no lie involved.

(6) This could be a case of lying. If the social context is one in which we understand that wearing a wedding ring indicates that someone is married, then wearing a wedding ring when you are not married seems like a case of lying.

(7) This does not seem like a case of lying as you were completely honest in your reply to the guard. However, if there was an intention to deceive then this may not be the case. But as it stands (7) is not a case of lying.

What then can we take from these quick examples?

Lying does not simply involve saying something false. That is what (5), the math case, shows us.

Lying can involve things other than speaking; it can involve writing, signs and symbols; that is what (6) — the wedding ring — shows us.

In cases such as (3), even if we say something we know to be false, it is not necessarily thought to be a lie as the intention to deceive is missing.

That is why “yes I like the jumper Gran” in (4) is a lie. You intend that your Gran adopt the false belief that you do like the jumper.

Notice finally that in the Bible smuggling case if the person knew that by telling the truth — “yes there are Bibles in the truck” — then the guards would form the false belief that there were no Bibles in the truck, then this might count as lying. So for something to be a lie, what is important is the intention to deceive — but it need not be the case that what is being said is false.

Of course, all these claims are controversial but they at least give us some starting points for thinking about the moral question.

Finally, as an aside, it is a controversial and philosophically interesting question whether we can lie to ourselves. We do not discuss this here but “not lying to oneself” is a common phrase

used by psychologists, self-help books, counselors etc. It is then a genuinely interesting question which deserves consideration at some point — just not here.

We can now frame the moral question like this. When, if ever, is it morally acceptable to intend for someone to adopt a belief which you know to be false?

Let's consider this question through the lens of some of the theories already discussed in this book.

### 3. UTILITARIANISM

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Consequentialism has two features. First is the definition of “good” (happiness, pleasure, well-being, preferences etc.) and then the consideration of right and wrong actions in relation to good. In particular, an action is right if, and only if, it brings about the greatest amount of happiness, pleasure, well-being, preference satisfaction etc.

The second feature is that everyone counts as equal in the calculations. That is, your good is as important as my good, which is as important as anyone else's good.

It follows from these two claims that no action is morally right or wrong irrespective of context. So we cannot say that lying is wrong because the action of lying will only be wrong if it brings about less good than not doing so. If I intend that you adopt a belief which I believe to be false but in so doing I generate more good than if I had not, then I have done something right.

Utilitarianism seems to be intuitive in some cases. Imagine, for example, a soldier captured and tortured but who still continues to lie and say that she does not know how to break the allies' codes, and in so doing she saves hundreds of thousands of lives. In this case people believe that she was right to have lied; given the horrific consequences of telling the truth she is morally required to lie. However, the intuitions work both ways and there are cases

where we think that sometimes it is morally counterintuitive to be required to lie.

Consider a famous example from H. J. McCloskey known as “McCloskey’s Sheriff”.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a scenario where there has been a serious crime in a town and the Sheriff is trying to prevent serious rioting. He knows that this rioting is likely to bring about destruction, injury and maybe even death. The problem is that he has no leads; he has not the slightest idea who committed the crime. However, he can prevent these riots by lying to the town and framing an innocent man. No one will miss the man and he is hated in the town. If he frames and jails this innocent man, convincing people to believe that it was this man that committed the crime, then the town will be placated and people will not riot. The consequentialist will judge in this case that it is morally required that the Sheriff lies even if this means that an innocent man is jailed. This then shows that the fact that the consequentialist says it is sometimes morally required to lie can lead to counterintuitive conclusions.

Let’s consider a mundane case. If lying to your gran brings about the best consequences — i.e. she is happy, you are happy, and she continues to knit which makes her happy etc., then it is morally acceptable to lie. Notice, however, that the consequentialist would say that we ought to lie; not just that it is acceptable to lie but that we have a moral obligation to lie.

Of course, the utilitarian should try and think harder about the possible consequences and outcomes in order to try and prevent some new problems arising. Consider the sheriff example; it could be that the real criminal confesses resulting in worse consequences than if the truth had been told at the outset. Now, not only will there be riots but there will also be no trust in the law enforcement. So, in fact, lying would bring about worse consequences, which means it would be wrong to lie.

Or consider the gran example. If your brother tells his gran that you lied, then we can imagine that this might mean she would not

be able ever to trust her grandchildren again, may give up knitting, and thus make her unhappier than if she had originally been told the truth about the jumper.

However, because no action is right or wrong qua action in Utilitarianism, it follows that the action of lying is neither wrong nor right. So to the question “does the utilitarian think that lying is wrong?” the answer is “it just depends”.

#### 4. THE KANTIAN AND LYING

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In contrast the Kantian claims that actions are wrong or right, qua actions. So rather than first defining good and then defining the right and wrong actions they first define right and wrong. How they might do this will depend on what type of deontologist they are. The Kantians ground the rightness and wrongness on reason. In particular, we introduced one version of Kant’s Categorical Imperative. We can show, using this, that Kant — and in fact all deontologists — think that the action of lying is wrong in all cases. Even if the consequence is saving a billion people, your own mother or an orphanage of children.

It is worth noting that in the other Kantian formula that we introduced, lying also comes out as wrong. Kant said that we should always treat others as an end in themselves, and never solely as a means to an end. We can see that this makes lying wrong. For if we lie to someone then we are not treating them as an end in themselves but are controlling what they can do by taking certain decisions out of their hands; we are basically saying we should be allowed to deceive them for our own ends. We are not treating them as rational agents and for the Kantian this is always morally wrong.

This might seem counter-intuitive, and it is. However, it is perhaps less so if we revisit our definition of lying. Go back to the soldier case. Imagine she is being tortured for military codes. It seems that one way to stop the consequence that hundreds of

thousands of people die would be simply to say nothing. And, given our definition, saying nothing would not be lying. So the Kantian may not be committed to the implausible conclusion that she has to reveal the secrets. Keeping silent is not the same as lying.

Furthermore, it is worth remembering that there are different ways of telling the truth! Saying to your gran: “I really appreciate all the work you’ve put in to my jumper, and my friend thinks it is an amazing jumper, but it really is not my style, I’m really sorry”, seem less objectionable than “No, I do not like it”.

So there are — maybe — ways of making Kant’s theory less objectionable when considering lying by thinking harder about what it actually means to lie. Even so, it seems undeniable that there are some cases where we think it is morally acceptable to lie but for the Kantian there are no such cases.

Notice that it is not just the Kantian that would say this. Other deontological theories would as well. For example, the Divine Command Theory, the theory that says that actions are right or wrong depending on whether God commands or prohibits them. If God says lying is wrong — and at least in the main monotheistic religions He does — then it is, full stop. Or consider the Catholic theologian Aquinas.

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## SUMMARY

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Philosophers, in many issues, like to start by asking what we mean by the key term. Once we ask the question “what is it to lie?” it becomes quickly apparent that the issues are complex and unclear. To lie does not just mean to say something false, rather it has something to do with trying to get another person to believe what you claim to be true, when you in fact think it is false.

Different theories we have looked at so far in this book have different responses to the question “is it wrong to lie”? The

utilitarian says “it depends”. That is, if the consequences of lying are better than telling the truth then we are morally required to lie. The deontologist — the Kantian or Divine Command Theorist for example — thinks that lying is always wrong. There are no situations at all when it would be morally acceptable to lie.

Both the consequentialist and the deontologist’s responses seem to lead to counterintuitive claims. One possible way to respond to this is to revisit the definition of lying and claim that the counterintuitive responses to moral questions regarding lying arise because of a false or incomplete understanding of what it is to lie.

Finally, we might simply reject the requirement of capturing our intuitions at all. We might simply say, so much the worse for our intuitions! We finished this chapter with some general thoughts about truth and lying in the political arena.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Lie

McCloskey’s Sheriff

Rule-utilitarian

Duty

“Post-truth”

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## Euthanasia

Part III  
APPLIED ETHICS

## EUTHANASIA



His enemies put it bluntly. Singer says it's OK to kill disabled babies. Singer says seriously damaged human beings are on a par with apes. Singer says it would have been OK to kill his own mother.

These charges are spat out of the sides of their mouths. One theologian I spoke to said contemptuously, 'Peter Singer takes the most basic human instincts and tries to reason them out of existence. What does he expect us to do, hug him?'<sup>1</sup>

## 1. EUTHANASIA INTRODUCTION

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There is an old adage that only two things in life are certain — death and taxes. While the morality of the latter would be an interesting topic itself, it is the morality of an issue connected to the former that draws the focus of this chapter. Specifically, we consider the ethical issues surrounding euthanasia (sometimes labelled as “mercy killing”).

## 2. KEY TERMS

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The etymology of euthanasia helps to reveal the meaning of the term. Like most upstanding and respectable philosophical terms, euthanasia has its roots in Ancient Greek language; it is based on a combination of the terms eu meaning “well” and thanatos meaning “death”. Euthanasia is thus the act of seeking to provide a good death for a person who otherwise might be faced with a much more unpleasant death — hence the term “mercy killing”.

There are different ways to categorize the various types of euthanasia and it is critical to be confident and familiar with these categorizations.

### Voluntary Euthanasia

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Voluntary euthanasia occurs when a person makes their own choice to have their life terminated in order to avoid future suffering.

## Non-Voluntary Euthanasia

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Non-voluntary euthanasia occurs when a decision regarding premature and merciful death is made by another person, because the individual to be euthanized is unable to make a decision for themselves. This form of euthanasia is most commonly associated with young infants or patients in a coma who cannot, due to the nature of their age or condition, make any decision for themselves.

The above offers a differentiation of types of euthanasia in terms of the person making the decision. In addition, we can differentiate between types of euthanasia based on the method involved in ending a life.

## Active Euthanasia

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If a person is actively euthanised it means that their death was caused by external intervention rather than natural causes, most likely through a lethal injection or the voluntary swallowing of a deadly cocktail of drugs.

## Passive Euthanasia

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Passive euthanasia occurs when a person is allowed to die due to the deliberate withdrawal of treatment that might keep them alive. Thus, a person who is passively euthanised is allowed to die via natural causes even though methods to keep them alive might be available. A person who has a life-support machine switched off, for example, dies via natural causes but only as a result of a decision to allow natural causes to take effect.

Although euthanasia that is both voluntary and passive is not particularly common, euthanasia could come in any combination of methods and decision-makers as laid out. Legality of the forms of euthanasia varies from nation to nation; Belgium allows for voluntary and active euthanasia, the UK does not.

In the next two sections, we outline two different forms of medical afflictions that will ground discussion of arguments in favor and against the varying forms of euthanasia. As an applied ethical issue, it is important to make ethical claims in the light of practical and real-world factors.

### 3. CASE ONE: PERSISTENT VEGETATIVE STATE

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A person is in a Persistent Vegetative State (hereafter PVS) when they are biologically able to support their own continued existence, but they have no meaningful psychological interaction with the world around them. A patient in a PVS, according to the National Health Service in the United Kingdom, can neither follow an object with their eyes nor respond to the sounds of voices and will show no discernible sign of emotion. The vegetative state is defined as persistent when the condition is in place for up to a year and doctors view no prospect of recovery as plausible. The PVS label may seem crude or upsetting, but the message about the difference between the physical and the psychological state of the patient is stark.

In the US, Terri Schiavo fell into a PVS when she suffered oxygen deprivation to her brain as a result of a heart attack. Although she survived the heart-attack, her husband ultimately came to the view that her continued existence was not desirable and that she would be better off being allowed to die.

In the United Kingdom, the parents of Tony Bland — a victim of the Hillsborough football disaster in 1989 — made a similar decision regarding the life of their son after he fell into a PVS. Tony Bland's parents campaigned for their son to be allowed to "die with dignity" rather than continue existing in his emaciated state. One can only attempt to imagine the emotional turmoil for the relatives in such cases and it is worth mentioning that Terri Schiavo's parents ultimately fought a legal battle against their son-in-law in attempt to ensure that Terri was not allowed to die.

When considering the morality of euthanasia for patients in a PVS, it is clear that we should be considering only non-voluntary euthanasia, due to the fact that such patients are clearly unable to make any kind of voluntary decision regarding their future interests. For the sake of simplicity, we will assume there are no relevant letter of intent from such patients, written in case they should lose their faculties, describing their desires should they fall into such a condition. However, you may find it rewarding to consider the moral implications of such a letter. Would the letter provide a voluntary decision that morally ought to be respected even when the patient is in a PVS?

#### 4. CASE TWO: INCURABLE AND TERMINAL ILLNESS

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Imagine a patient who has been diagnosed with an incurable disease that will ultimately bring about their death. As the condition progresses over time, the patient knows that their ability to live a normal life will decrease and that their physical suffering will increase. You can imagine for yourselves the range of diseases and conditions that may have such unfortunate effects upon a person.

Unlike the patient in a PVS, the patient in this example retains the ability to ask for euthanasia themselves and so these cases can highlight moral issues surrounding voluntary euthanasia. Again, for simplicity in our discussion, we do not consider where the line can be drawn regarding patients in fit or unfit psychological states when it comes to an ability to make a voluntary decision to be euthanized, although this is also an issue that would reward further moral thought.

#### 5. PRO-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT ONE

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In this section, we consider the first of the arguments in favor of the moral acceptability of euthanasia. This argument is a general argument and would apply to both non-voluntary and voluntary

forms of euthanasia. However, the argument, if sound, would also seem to suggest that active euthanasia is more morally acceptable than passive euthanasia for reasons discussed at the end of this section.

This initial argument can be labelled as the argument from quality of life. According to this relatively simple idea, sometimes life is actually less preferable than death. On such occasions, when quality of life is so dreadful that a person would be “better off” dead, then euthanasia would be morally justifiable. Evidently, much turns on what counts as a worthwhile life. Recalling the section on well-being, there are various philosophical positions that might seek to provide a criterion to measure the quality of a person’s life. A hedonist, for example, would suggest that the quality of a life depends on how much happiness/pleasure a person experiences; a supporter of a desire-satisfaction theory would suggest the quality of a life depends on how many of a person’s desires are satisfied; an objective-list theorist would suggest that the quality of a life depends on how many objectively valuable goods a person possesses — goods including, but not limited to, knowledge and love, for example.

Whichever one of these views a person supports, or even if they understand other factors as being determinants of the quality of a life, there can little doubt that a person in a PVS has, at best, a non-existent quality of life in virtue of their extreme psychological limitations. Suggesting that some form of consciousness is necessary to having any kind of quality of life, Jonathan Glover (1941–) says:

I have no way of refuting someone who holds that being alive, even though unconscious, is intrinsically valuable [valuable irrespective of the form of being alive]. But it is a view that will seem unattractive to those of us who, in our own case, see a life of permanent coma as in no way preferable to death. From the subjective point of view, there is nothing to choose between the two.<sup>2</sup>

Deprived of happiness and other capabilities, the life of a patient in a PVS seems to be at best utterly neutral and at worst negative in respect of quality of life, perhaps depending on any experience of physical pain. Patients in a PVS are not merely bed-ridden like some who might have suffered severe strokes or other such afflictions; they are biological entities lacking the distinguishing psychological qualities of typical human beings. This may go some way to explain why some (but by no means all) partners and parents of people in PVS's are willing to favour an end to the patient's life.

The case of Diane Pretty is informative when considering the quality of life of a person with a terminal illness who is nearing the end of their life. Diane Pretty suffered from motor-neurone disease and although she remained mentally proficient, the worsening of her condition over time led her to request to be allowed to die quickly and without undue suffering. Although the point in time cannot be sharply labelled, it seems extremely plausible that many of those with worsening terminal illnesses will reach a point in time where their quality of life is non-existent or negative in virtue of their physical suffering and their inability to enjoy life, satisfy desires or acquire objectively valuable goods. I recall, as a young teenager, listening to Diane Pretty express her desire to be allowed to die and wondering how anyone could reach a point where they would not want to see one more sunrise or live one more day — these questions, I suggest, reflected more of my inability to empathize with her daily existence than they did with undue depression on her part.

Thus, if we focus on the quality of life for patients in a PVS, or for those nearing the final stages of a terminal illness, we may well grant that there is a time when quality of life either becomes negative or ceases to be relevant. If we suggest that a life with no discernible quality of life is not worthwhile, then euthanasia may appear morally justifiable.

If you find the argument from quality of life convincing, then you may judge that active euthanasia is far more morally defensible



than passive euthanasia; after all the judgment that euthanasia is morally acceptable may seem to be the load-bearing judgment, with the choice of method more of a practical than a moral issue. Indeed, in this context, passive euthanasia might seem to be the worst of all worlds.

According to Peter Singer, "Having chosen death [as a morally acceptable course of action] we should ensure that it comes in the best possible way".<sup>3</sup> The best possible way, if we remain interested in quality of life, might seem to be a lethal injection designed to send a patient painlessly to sleep before shutting down their organs, or a selection of drinkable liquids that have the same effect. The best possible way might not seem to involve turning off a life support machine or withdrawing proactive treatment in order to allow nature to take its course, when the course of nature may be directed by starvation, dehydration or secondary infections. Although these passively viewed death-causing effects may be managed with pain killers, Singer's relatively simple thought is that if death is deemed morally desirable, then why not simply provide death actively rather than passively?

In addition, if we recall the ideas of Situation Ethicist Joseph Fletcher then we may wonder whether or not (assuming death is morally desirable) passively allowing death to occur is actually less loving than actively bringing death about. As a relativistic normative ethical theory, Situation Ethics provides no absolute guidance regarding the moral acceptability of euthanasia in any of its forms; situation-specific, practical and pragmatic judgments will need to form the basis of moral judgments in individual cases. However, it is important to consider how loving active euthanasia might actually be in the circumstance where the death of the patient is actually our ambition.

## 6. PRO-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT TWO

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The second argument we can offer in support of

euthanasia — both in voluntary and non-voluntary forms — can be labelled the argument from resource use. Whereas the former argument attempted to defend the moral acceptability of euthanasia by utilizing the perspective of the patient and their associated quality of life, this argument may seem a little more detached and you may or may not view this as a strength or weakness.

According to Peter Singer, the non-voluntary euthanizing of a severely disabled and suffering young infant child (who cannot express any wishes regarding their future) may be justifiable on the following grounds:

When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed.<sup>4</sup>

Singer's suggestion may sound callous, and if you view killing an innocent life as an absolute moral wrong then you may view his claim as immediately morally out of bounds (this kind of objection to euthanasia is considered in a later section). For now, however, let us take Singer's claim at face value. Being a preference utilitarian, Singer makes his judgment regarding how to act in such a case based on the quality of life of the individuals involved. So, on his view, the disabled infant may have a lower quality of life than a healthy child who might be born in their stead because the latter, and not the former, can secure greater preference satisfaction. Thus, we morally ought to bring about the situation in which the healthy child is born.

If we assume that those who are in a PVS, or those suffering near the end of a terminal condition, have a low quality of life then we might think that spending our limited medical resources on maintaining their existence, rather than spending those resources elsewhere, is not morally desirable. This kind of argument will appeal to a teleologist rather than a deontologist, for it ascribes moral values to actions based on consequences rather than duties. In this setting, the consequences of spending resources on PVS

patients may be less positive than spending those same resources on effectively treating other diseases or funding medical research to benefit future generations.

Some financial figures may put this possible argument into context. According to the Madison County Record, Christina McCray (a patient in a PVS) had medical bills that average out to \$250,000 per year.<sup>5</sup> If we consider the years of life that a patient in a PVS may have, along with the number of PVS patients that exist, then the cost of keeping such individuals alive becomes clearer. If medicine is sometimes about making difficult decisions, then it may become clear why non-voluntary euthanasia of such patients might be considered desirable (at least with the support of the family). In addition, if a patient with a poor quality of life, who is facing future suffering with associated expensive care, voluntarily requests euthanasia then it may be that their death will allow resources to be better directed to other patients who might have their suffering reduced more significantly.

It is worth noting, for those uncomfortable with this kind of resource allocation planning when it comes to treating ill, suffering and frail patients that decisions in the National Health Service are already being made in the light of teleological and quality-of-life based reasoning. The NHS utilises QALYs when making financial planning and treatment costing decisions. QALY is shorthand for Quality Adjusted Life Year, a measurement designed to consider the benefits of different treatment costs in respect of their pay-offs to the patients involved. If a potential treatment will lead to a patient being free from pain and able to perform daily activities (this is a somewhat rough definition, but enough for our purposes) then the year in which this outcome is expected can be given a value of 1. Each following year can then be given a value between 0 and 1 according to the expected lasting impacts of the treatment. Thus, allocating spending to different forms of treatment for different patients can be objectively calculated against a common

standard in order to inform those spending decisions in terms of where the better consequences might be secured.

The argument from resource use is, therefore, an extension of the use of a QALY to inform medical decision-making. If the positive consequences of spending money on treating patients who might be cured or helped to have a higher quality of life are greater than spending money to keep people alive who either wish to die and have a diminishing quality of life or who are in a PVS, then spending on the former is morally defensible rather than spending on the latter. Again, you might consider how loving it is to spend money keeping a patient in a PVS alive versus investing in research for cures and treatments that could improve the quality of life for other patients in a world where resources are finite.

## 7. PRO-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT THREE

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The final argument we will offer in favor of euthanasia is an argument often viewed as the most powerful in this applied ethical area, the argument from personal autonomy. This argument proceeds from the fairly plausible assumption that people should have the right to make their own decisions and should be able to decide the paths of their own lives. If the right to choose our own path applies in life, then why would this not apply in respect of our choice of how and when to die?

Perhaps the most famous philosophical proponent of a right to personal autonomy and decision-making was John Stuart Mill. Mill elucidated the harm principle, which suggested that the only legitimate government interference in a person's life is to stop that person from harming others; all other interference is not to be justified. If you subscribe to this principle, then you seemingly must believe that a person voluntarily requesting euthanasia should not be denied the right to die, unless their dying would cause harm to another person. If we discount emotional harm (because many normal things that we do seem to cause emotional harm to other

people — getting a job over another candidate, for example) then it is not easy to envisage a circumstance in which a terminally ill patient, requesting a merciful death before their suffering becomes too extreme, would have a death that causes physical harm to another person. Therefore, if we believe in the power and moral right of the individual to act in the way that they deem correct, unless physically harming another, then we must seemingly allow that voluntary euthanasia is morally justifiable. Singer sums up the position:

...the principle of respect for autonomy tells us to allow rational agents to live their own lives according to their own autonomous decisions, free from coercion or interference; but if rational agents should autonomously choose to die, then respect for autonomy will lead us to assist them to do as they choose.<sup>6</sup>

We have spoken above of voluntary euthanasia specifically, for the patient in a PVS obviously cannot choose how to die. If we return to the earlier mentioned possibility of a letter of intent, written prior to the condition taking hold, then in certain instances non-voluntary euthanasia may also be justified on this basis — though of course, such cases seem to a species of voluntary euthanasia.

However, if we would trust loved ones to make other important medical decisions for us if we were incapacitated, then perhaps the same should apply in this context and non-voluntary euthanasia might be justifiable in virtue of properly respecting the choices made by one relative on behalf of another. It is for you to consider if a theory of personal autonomy can be extended to familial autonomy in such a way.

## 8. ANTI-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT ONE

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Thus far we have only outlined pro-euthanasia arguments. In fact, we have really only provided pro-active euthanasia arguments in virtue of Singer's suggestions regarding the undesirability of

passive euthanasia. It is now time to give anti-euthanasia, and anti-active euthanasia, arguments their fair hearing.

The first objection to euthanasia may be termed the objection from Sanctity of Life. The Sanctity of Life ethic is usually founded on religious, and specifically Christian, thinking. Essentially, a belief that life is sacred suggests an absolute value to life, of a type that means it is worthwhile in all circumstances; in Glover's earlier words it is the view that life has an intrinsic value that supersedes any qualitative aspect. For Sanctity of Life theorists and supporters as described in this section, problems with the quality of a life never undermine the ultimate value and worth of a life.

It is not necessary to be religious to hold the view that all lives are worth preserving, irrespective of quality. A non-religious person may prefer to speak of an absolute right to life that cannot be taken away through non-voluntary euthanasia, and cannot be revoked by personal decree in the context of voluntary euthanasia. However, more often, the view is supported by Biblical reference. In the Bible, we are told that God said: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness".<sup>7</sup>

In addition, our bodies are described as sacred and as containing God's Holy Spirit: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple".<sup>8</sup> These quotes not only reveal the sanctity of our bodies and the cause of that sanctity — our creation in the image of God and the presence of God's spirit within us — they also reveal the punishment for those who might take life; might this relate to doctors who administer euthanasia?

Whilst the arguments from quality of life and use of resources were avowedly teleological in nature, considering the painful and potentially costly consequences of continued life, the argument from Sanctity of Life is deontological in nature since it relates to a duty to avoid killing. Linking the Sanctity of Life view to both

abortion and euthanasia, Mother Teresa gave a statement of the appeal of this ethical stance:

For me, life is the most beautiful gift of God to mankind, therefore people and nations who destroy life by abortion and euthanasia are the poorest. I do not say legal or illegal, but I think that no human hand should be raised to kill life, since life is God's life us in us.<sup>9</sup>

All human life, whether in the womb or in a PVS, is of sacred and God-given worth such that killing (including euthanizing, as a form of killing) is morally impermissible.

The notion of a sacred life lays behind Catholic teaching on the issue of euthanasia. A 1980 Catholic Declaration of Faith is clear and absolute in nature:

...no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly, nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action. For it is a question of the violation of the divine law, an offence against the dignity of the human person, a crime against life, and an attack on humanity.<sup>10</sup>

The language is somewhat complex but the key points are given in our previous discussions in this chapter — life is sacred and so euthanasia, whether voluntarily requested or non-voluntarily encouraged for someone else, is morally impermissible. No legislator, guided by moral ideals, can ever morally recommend this type of killing, whether motivated by a mistaken sense of mercy or not.

## 9. ANTI-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT TWO

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A related objection to euthanasia, premised on a commitment to Christianity, is the objection from valuable suffering (keep in mind that not all Christians, by any stretch, would defend an objection of

this type). Let us return to the 1980 Catholic Declaration of Faith. The document states that:

According to Christian teaching, however, suffering, especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan; it is in fact a sharing in Christ's passion and a union with the redeeming sacrifice which He offered in obedience to the Father's will.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, even if someone requests euthanasia in order to avoid pain, that request should not be granted because it deprives a person of an element of God's plan for them; the experience of suffering at the end of life brings that person closer to sharing in the experience of Christ. This does not mean that Christians oppose palliative care (a type of care that does not attempt to extend life, so much as make an individual as comfortable as possible as they face the end of their life). However, it does explain why a life should be seen through to its natural end and why it might therefore be viewed as morally wrong to shorten it.

## 10. ANTI-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT THREE

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The third anti-euthanasia argument to consider can be labelled the slippery slope objection (sometimes called the Wedge argument). This objection does not require any view regarding the Sanctity of Life or a deontological duty not to kill; indeed, the slippery slope objection is both teleological in nature and does not even require a denial that euthanasia might be desirable in certain instances when viewed in the abstract or in isolation.

The slippery slope objection is that if euthanasia were to become legal in some situations, then it would lead to euthanasia becoming legal and acceptable in situations where it is actually morally undesirable. To see the strength of such an objection, consider earlier pro-euthanasia arguments couched in terms of resource allocation and personal autonomy.

If euthanasia can be justified on teleological grounds when



resources would be better deployed elsewhere, then what is to stop us justifying not merely voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia, but involuntary euthanasia also? If euthanasia is justified on the basis of money and time being better spent on some patients rather than others, then why would permission be required from the patient or the patient's family?

If morality is determined by consequences, and consequences justify euthanasia, then we seem to be slipping down a dangerous slope to euthanizing people without their consent. After all, if you are a teleologist (perhaps, an act utilitarian) you have already given up ideas concerning absolute rules against certain actions. It therefore may be objected that either life is sacred, or it is not, and if it is not then we may end up in a situation we find utterly morally indefensible even if we start from apparently moral motivations.

In addition, if personal autonomy is respected to the degree that someone can choose when to end their life, then what is to stop a seriously depressed person who is otherwise physically healthy from opting for voluntary euthanasia? Most people might view such enabling of suicide for patients with mental health needs as being very different from euthanasia for PVS patients or the terminally ill, but if personal autonomy justifies euthanasia then how can we justifiably draw a strong enough line so as to allow some people to choose death, but not others? Again, it may be objected that either personal autonomy matters or it does not. If we enable a person to have their life ended, then it is obvious they can never come to a different view on the value of their life at a later stage, as they might have had they still been alive.

In addition, opponents of euthanasia often suggest that if one group of people are euthanized, others may begin to feel pressure to take up that same option. If non-voluntary euthanasia is granted, and a legal, moral and cultural line in the sand is thereby crossed, may not elderly patients feel pressured to not be a burden to their families? May not the financially well-off elderly feel pressure to allow their children to inherit any accumulated wealth rather than

see that wealth spent on their own care? Granting non-voluntary euthanasia in even a small number of cases may, over time, send us down a slippery slope to the non-morally defensible euthanizing of many other types of patients who, as things stand, are quite content to remain alive since they have no reason to consider other options.

Of course, an easy response to any slippery slope objection is simply to deny that a change in one fact must lead to a suggested negative change elsewhere. Why think of negative consequences from a change in the law, when these consequences might not happen? Indeed, some slippery slope arguments are logical fallacies if they are premised on the idea that a possible negative outcome must, of necessity, follow from some change in policy. However, we should not “straw-man” the objection in this way (i.e. phrase it in such a weak way that it is easy to argue against). The slippery slope objection suggests that the negative outcomes might be probable, rather than be certain. Thus, a response should deal with the issue of probable negative consequences, rather than cheapening a plausibly reasonable objection through willful misrepresentation of its structure. Researching the situation in Belgium, where the law regarding euthanasia is perhaps the most liberal in the world, should provide a good grounding to either support or oppose this line of thought, as would considering the application of Rule Utilitarianism.<sup>12</sup>

## 11. ANTI-EUTHANASIA: ARGUMENT FOUR

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A fourth anti-euthanasia objection is the objection from modern treatment. This objection brings together two distinct, but relevantly similar, lines of thought. Firstly, it might be suggested that to euthanize those who are terminally ill, or those in a PVS, is to kill people earlier than would otherwise happen and thereby to artificially eliminate their chances of living to experience a cure to their condition. At the very least, if not a cure, euthanized people

are not around to benefit from any step-forward in treatment that might alleviate their suffering.

In addition, given the modern advances in palliative care it might also be argued that end of life care is now so advanced that euthanasia is not necessary in order to avoid suffering and so cannot be justified even on quality of life grounds. It might be thought plausible that a person with a severe and worsening disease who is not euthanized could have their condition and pain carefully managed by skilled healthcare professionals so as to greatly diminish any suffering.

In response to these types of objections, Singer grants that were euthanasia legalized then some deaths may occur for people who could have been treated had they been kept alive. However, he urges that:

Against a very small number of unnecessary deaths that might occur if euthanasia is legalized we must place the very large amount of pain and distress that will be suffered if euthanasia is not legalized, by patients who really are terminally ill.<sup>13</sup>

On balance, Singer suggests, euthanasia would cause more pain to cease than pleasure missed by those who die early. Whether or not palliative care is able to reduce suffering to the extent suggested by the objection is something you may wish to consider and further research, as it would seem to be an empirical claim requiring contemporary evidence to further the discussion.

## 12. ALLOWING VERSUS DOING

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James Rachels (1941–2003) sums up the supposed moral importance of the distinction between allowing and doing in the euthanasia debate:

The distinction between active and passive euthanasia is thought to be crucial for medical ethics. The idea is that it is permissible, at least in some cases, to withhold treatment and allow a patient to die, but it is never permissible to take any direct action designed

to kill the patient. This doctrine seems to be accepted by most doctors.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, according to Rachels, most doctors at the time of his paper — and not much seems to have changed in the UK context since — would think it permissible to allow a patient to die (passive euthanasia, on our definitions) but think it impermissible to kill a patient even if they request it or if it is deemed to be in their interests (active euthanasia).

The plausibility of this distinction is supported by consideration of the Doctrine of Double Effect, as drawn from the normative Natural Law moral theory. Recall from the chapter on Natural Law ethics that one of the primary precepts for human beings is the preservation of life. No moral prescription, we might think, could speak more strongly and absolutely against euthanasia — especially given the Catholic background of Aquinas's Natural Law stance and the earlier reference to Catholic views in the context of the Sanctity of Life ethic. A secondary precept, derived from this primary precept, would certainly seem to deny the moral acceptability of artificial shortening of life. However, Natural Law theorists are able to have a nuanced stance in the euthanasia debate.

A Natural Law theorist, via the Doctrine of Double Effect, can describe an action as moral even if it results in an outcome that might not be considered morally permissible in the abstract. If an act is directed by a desire to do moral good, yet has a foreseeable but unintended consequence of a bad effect, then this action may be moral so long as the bad effect was not aimed at, does not outweigh the good effect and is not directly the cause of the bad itself. If this brief comment is unclear, it is critical to look back to the relevant discussion of the Doctrine of Double Effect in the chapter on Natural Law.

Now, let us apply this doctrine directly to the context of euthanasia. A doctor may be aware that a patient has not long to live and is suffering immensely. The doctor may prescribe a

multitude of painkillers to treat the pain, even though this will have the foreseeable but unintended effect of killing the patient as a result of the side-effects of the drugs. Indeed, a doctor may simply refrain from offering painful treatment methods in order to avoid causing suffering, with the unintended but foreseeable consequence that the patient will die as a result of the non-intervention. These actions are not morally wrong, says the Natural Law theorist, because death is not intended directly but rather the morally good end of pain reduction is intended directly. Thus, the doctor who engages in active euthanasia by provision of a lethal cocktail of drugs in order to artificially kill a patient so that their suffering is reduced is morally wrong (for the good of "suffering reduction" is directly achieved by the bad of killing), while the doctor who withdraws treatment in order to relieve suffering, with the unintended but foreseeable outcome of death, acts morally justly (for the good of "suffering reduction" is achieved by not administering painful treatment, death is just a proportionately acceptable side-effect).

Both Rachels and Singer have little time for the distinction between allowing and doing, and the Doctrine of Double Effect, in this debate. Rachels says that:

If a doctor lets a patient die, for humane reasons, he is in the same position as if he had given the patient a lethal injection for humane reasons...if the doctor's decision was the right (to not intervene on the patient's death) one, the method used is not itself important.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Singer comments that "We cannot avoid responsibility simply by directing our intention to one effect rather than another. If we foresee both effects, we must take responsibility for the foreseen effects of what we do".<sup>16</sup> Singer gives the example of a business seeking to save money in order to hire more workers. This outcome is good and motivates bosses to act to save money on their recycling bill, with the foreseeable but unintended consequence of polluting a local river. If we would not

excuse the company for ignoring a foreseeable consequence, says Singer, then we do not really believe we escape responsibility for allowing death in the euthanasia context.

The application of the Doctrine of Double Effect, and Natural Law ethics in general, to the euthanasia debate should be considered carefully and in the light of the earlier chapter outlining the normative theory itself. Despite both Singer's and Rachel's attack, Natural Law and the Doctrine of Double Effect retain many proponents. If one views moral outcomes as based on more than consequences alone, then this approach may seem to have more merit than a preference utilitarian like Singer might grant it; this is for you to judge.

## SUMMARY

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Euthanasia is an applied moral topic that has profound implications; successful moral arguments may lead to legislative changes that quite literally shorten or extend lifespans. There are a host of subtleties in the debate to which we can only pay lip-service — such as the acceptability of active euthanasia of depressed patients, the importance of pre-injury requests for treatment or for death; the best way of allocating medical resources; the powers of people over both their bodies and the bodies of incapacitated family members. Further issues are discussed in works such as that by J. David Velleman, and we suggest the references below as a guide to useful and inquiring texts.<sup>17</sup> However, we hope that you now feel confident to explain and evaluate the key arguments both in favor and against the various methods of euthanasia and the various contexts in which those methods may be employed.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Doctrine of double effect

Palliative care

Persistent Vegetative State

Well-being

Sanctity of Life

Straw-man

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## CHAPTER 44

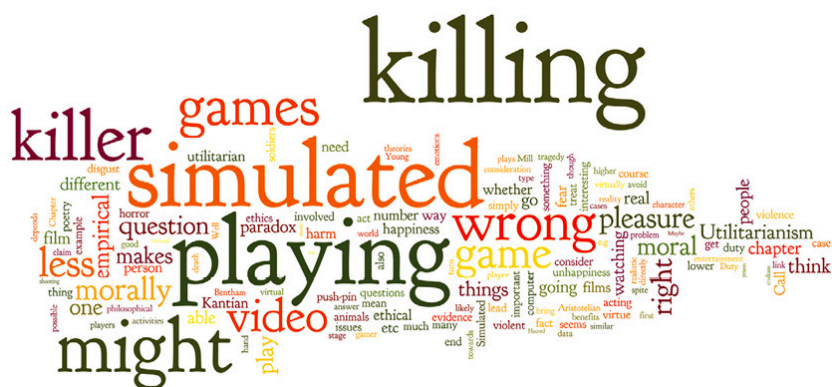
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# *Simulated Killing*

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## SIMULATED KILLING

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Can you avoid knowledge? You cannot! Can you avoid technology? You cannot! Things are going to go ahead in spite of ethics, in spite of your personal beliefs, in spite of everything.<sup>1</sup>

Technology: the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Ethics is about how we live in the world and how we interact with one another. Given that “simulated” killing is, well, “simulated”, we might think that it falls outside ethical consideration. However, this chapter will challenge this claim. Simply granting that a scenario is not “real” does not mean that it should not be thought of as ethical. We think through how the various ethical theories we have looked at in this book might have something to say about simulated killing. The chapter relies on the work of Michael Lacewing (1971–) and Garry Young.<sup>3</sup>

Simulated killing can mean a number of things and at first it is perhaps easier to say what it is not. Obviously simulated killing is not actual killing, nor is it a description or representation of killing. So J. K. Rowling's description of the death of Voldemort will not count as simulated killing nor would Caravaggio's painting depicting John the Baptist's decapitation. However, acting in a film involving killing — Schindler's List for example, or acting Romeo killing Tybalt on stage, would. Furthermore, with the advent of computer games and virtual reality there are interesting, and arguably morally different, dimensions to simulated killing. Specifically, modern technology helps us all be part of the simulation.

Of course, one reaction to supposed ethical worries surrounding this topic might be simply — “grow up”! There are many horrific things — real things — going on in the world, poverty, torture, crippling debt. They are the things that as ethicists we ought to be concerning ourselves with. In contrast these simulated things are just entertainment. After a killing scene in a film the actors will go home; the actors in Romeo and Juliet will dust themselves off and go out for a drink, and the pixels will be altered on the computer

monitor and reformed due to electrical charges. No one is actually hurt!

However, to counter this more dismissive attitude, consider a few examples. The thing to keep in mind when reading them is whether this “who cares, it’s not real!” attitude seems right? And if it is not, why?

1. A local high security prison has a large number of child killers. They often riot which causes massive destruction and suffering. However, the prison warden proposes a way of stopping the rioting. At little cost, each inmate can be given his or her own virtual reality headset that gives each prisoner the ability to engage virtually in his or her favorite child killing fantasy. Experiments have shown that the immersive nature of this seems to act like a safety valve and prisoners become quiet and helpful and are willing to get involved in educational and community programs. Should they be given the headsets?
2. It is common for armies to use very realistic computer gaming to train their soldiers. Imagine that soldiers are currently fighting in Syria and their Syrian training simulator — along with realistic Russian and US soldiers, realistic maps, civilian sites such as mosques etc. — is released for sale. Is there anything wrong with this?
3. As part of one level of the video game Call of Duty — Modern Warfare 2 you are expected to participate in a mass shooting of civilians at a Moscow airport in order to pass yourself off as a Russian terrorist. If you play this level are you doing something morally wrong?
4. In June 2015 a video game called “Hatred” was released. The aim of the game is simple, to kill as many civilians as possible. The gamer controls the character through a town, shooting, burning, running over, blowing up, and

executing random innocent people. (Equally controversial is Super Columbine Massacre RPG! Where players can play Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and re-enact the Columbine High School Massacre). Is it morally wrong to play such games?

What is interesting is that we suspect that many of you reading this chapter would find some or all of (1)–(4) objectionable. Even, perhaps, morally objectionable.

In this chapter we will start by looking at different moral theories and how they might capture this intuition. We will then consider the type of cases, one's in which we are observing the simulated killing. We end by highlighting a famous philosophical problem that might relate to these issues, the Paradox of Tragedy.

## 2. UTILITARIANISM AND SIMULATED KILLING

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For Utilitarianism no act, qua act, is right or wrong. So we cannot say that playing at killing others is wrong. What we have to focus on is how much happiness is created in particular examples of simulated killing.

In asking this question regarding the amount of happiness we might conclude that there is nothing wrong with (1)–(4). After all, the inmates, the players of Call of Duty or Hatred get enjoyment and there is a lot of happiness, no one is hurt, and there is no unhappiness. In fact, we can imagine that there might be more unhappiness if someone stops playing these games. Perhaps people who are stopped from playing their video games might turn to making life miserable for those around them or slump into depression. In fact, then, according to Utilitarianism it might be that playing a killer in a computer game is something that some people morally ought to do. In some situations, it might even be their duty to play such games.

This said, notice that the question is an empirical one (i.e. it is a

question answered a posteriori rather than a priori). If playing the killer in simulated killing leads to more unhappiness than not doing so, then playing the killer is wrong. But why might such simulated killing bring about unhappiness?

Perhaps playing a killer makes people more inclined to violent behavior? Perhaps it makes the player less able to empathize and trust, each of which might lead to the player being more likely to harm others (what McCormick calls “risk increasing acts”<sup>4</sup>). Or perhaps playing simulated killing desensitizes the players to violence in ways which might be harmful to both themselves and other?

As Young (2014) reports the evidence relevant to these sorts of claims is mixed. In some cases, where a gamer perhaps already has a predisposition to violence, playing the killer will lead her to violence and harm. So the utilitarian would say it is morally wrong for this person to play such games. Whereas in other cases, where the player has a “normal” disposition, playing a killer in a video game may have no negative effects; in which case, it is not morally wrong.

So, for Utilitarianism if there is a clear link between risk-increasing acts and playing the killer in games then we might be able to say that such game playing is morally wrong. But the evidence does not support this claim. There is though, a further consideration to be made when thinking about playing the killer. If you recall, Bentham and Mill differ in their approaches to “happiness”. Bentham famously claims:

Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and science of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either...If poetry and music deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased.<sup>5</sup>

Because “push pin is as good as poetry” Bentham would treat playing the killer in a video game in the same way as any other

pleasure. However, you'll also recall that Mill thought that this was not quite right, and that push-pin (or, in our case, playing the killer in *Call of Duty/Hatred* etc.) is perhaps not of equal value as the pleasure we get from other activities such as poetry.

Maybe then when doing a utilitarian calculation regarding the pleasure involved in playing at killing we need to consider — not just the empirical questions highlighted above, but also whether such pleasure is higher or lower? We might reasonably conclude (though this is debatable) that it is a lower pleasure. Mill might argue that the inmate gaining pleasure from enacting virtue kill fantasies is not just of less quantity, but is of less quality than joining a drawing class or, say, visiting an Art Gallery.

Of course, introducing the distinction between higher and lower pleasure will not necessarily lead to the conclusion that playing the killer in video games is morally wrong. We might argue (can you?) that playing such games as *Call of Duty* can in fact lead to higher pleasure. Or we might agree that it is correct to think of such activities as a lower pleasure but still maintain that in some instances it would be right to play the killer in these games.

There are further things that Utilitarianism would have to take into account in each case. For instance, what is going to be important is not only the type of person playing the simulated killing — do they have a violent disposition? — but the type of killing that is simulated. Maybe the way that the killing is simulated: the age, race and gender of the person killed and the method of death are important. Perhaps, for example, a simulated killing which is highly sexualized is much more likely to bring about harm in the gamer. Or in contrast maybe the simulated killing of uniformed soldiers in a video game does not change people's outlook and behavior. The simple point is that the utilitarian questions about "simulated killing" can only be answered if we first pin down the precise details of the situation.

Young is a good place to end this section:

We have a very good idea of the benefits of video games. Their

economic impact is quantifiable as is the number of hours of entertainment they bring to gamers. GTA [Grand Theft Auto] alone sold over 66 million games by 2008, evidence that at least this many people derive entertainment from game violence. Other heavily criticized violent games are likewise usually among the top sellers. There are also a number of educational benefits. The improvements in visual perception, hand-eye coordination, and other motor skills from gaming are also well documented. The difficulty only lies in deciding how much these benefits should weigh against any harm that games do, but this is a problem intrinsic to utilitarian theory and should not be counted against violent games.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. THE KANTIAN AND THE VIRTUE ETHICS APPROACH

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We have placed these two theories together because in the end what they have to say about playing the killer in video games is going to be similar. Specifically, whether they think playing the killer is right or wrong is going to depend directly on the empirical data about how doing so will change the person playing the game.

Recall that Kant said that we have no moral duty towards animals because they are non-rational. But, he argues, that this does not mean we can treat animals cruelly. This is because if we did treat them cruelly we might become less able to act rationally and discharge our duties in areas where we do have a moral duty towards other. Put simply it makes us worse at being moral beings. An Aristotelian would say a similar thing. Namely, although it is not wrong to harm animals because of animals "rights", it is wrong because it does not help us develop the right types of virtues, e.g. sensitivity, empathy, compassion.

The point of this diversion into animal ethics is that the morality of playing the killer in video games will be dealt with in the same way. If playing the killer makes us less able to reason and hence discern our duty towards others, then Kant would say that we



should avoid them. But, as stated above, this is an open question as the empirical evidence is inconclusive.

Shifting to virtue theory, if playing the killer makes us less virtuous — e.g. less courageous, empathetic, sensitive etc. — then the virtue theorist will claim this will make us less able to do the right thing at the right time to the right proportion. This means that playing the killer is to be avoided. So to the question “would the Aristotelian or Kantian think it is wrong to play the killer in video games?” the answer is: “Not directly, it just depends on the link between doing so and its effects on us as moral agents”.

#### 4. FILMS AND PLAYS

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Recall, we started this chapter by pointing out that simulated killing takes place in films and plays. Notice that this might include watching simulated killing, or acting out the killing. Playing such characters is — we guess — of less direct relevance to our readers. Anyway, we suggest that we could treat playing the killer in films and plays in a similar way as we have in video games. Of course, there might be further complications when asking how playing a killer on stage or in a film differs psychologically from playing one in a video game. However, we suggest the issues are still fundamentally the same, it is just how we extract the empirical data — what sort of empirical questions we need to ask — which will be different. For example, perhaps physically holding a (fake) knife or gun makes us more — or less — likely to hold a real knife or gun. Or perhaps watching people being (virtually) shot and (virtually) bleeding makes us less — or more — sensitive to real blood and death. And perhaps this is fundamentally different to how playing a knife-wielding killer in a video game affects us. But again, this is an empirical and not a philosophical question. (It is interesting to note that because of the increase in the sophistication of virtual reality, the gap between playing video games and acting in films/plays might be closing.)

What then about simply watching simulated killing? Well, we do not need to rehearse again the general approaches discussed above. Does the utilitarian think that watching killing is wrong? Well it depends on the consequences. Does the Kantian or the Aristotelian? Well it depends on how it affects us as moral agents. And the answer to these questions is, again, an empirical matter.

We end with an ancient philosophical problem which has come to be known as the Paradox of Tragedy. Although it is not directly about ethics, it brings to the fore issues to do with authenticity and character which might have a direct link to other issues we have discussed.

## 5. THE PARADOX OF TRAGEDY (OR MORE CORRECTLY THE PARADOX OF “NEGATIVE EMOTIONS”)

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Imagine that we go into a hotel room and we see bloody hand marks on the wall and in the shower. We feel disgusted, anxious and scared. We quickly turn around and get out of there as quickly as possible. Such emotions are unwelcome and make us uncomfortable. However, consider all the time and money spent on watching and making films which have upsetting scenarios. Watching films (of course it does not have to be a film — the same reasoning applies to plays or video games) generate in us disgust, anxiety and fear but we flock in our droves to such films. In fact, the more scary/disgusting/disturbing the film is, the more attractive it seem to audiences. Consider Hitchcock’s groundbreaking *Psycho* for example. Here then is the “paradox”. On the one hand negative emotions are not desired, whereas in other context they are.

Although it is not a genuine paradox it is certainly a tension — an odd thing that needs to be explained. We will not go into the possible explanations here. What is interesting to us is that this paradox seems to be particularly pertinent when we refer to simulated killing. Presumably we would find it particularly horrific if we witnessed real life killing, but if it is “simulated” perhaps these

emotions — horror, fear, etc. are qualitatively different. Call them \*fear\*, \*horror\*, \*disgust\*.

This in turn might mean that we need to be less worried about the changes in our character that might come about through simulated killing because they are to do with \*fear\* not fear, \*horror\* not horror, \*disgust\* not disgust etc. Again, we do not need to go into the details of this. It is though just another dimension to simulated killing which may have moral significance and consequently deserve consideration.

## SUMMARY

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“Simulated killing” covers a number of different areas; it could involve playing the killer, or watching someone play the killer. In the first category it could be an actor on film or stage, or it could be someone playing a video game.

Initially we might think that because it is “simulated” this topic is outside ethics. But using Utilitarianism, Kantian and Virtue Ethical lenses we have shown that this is not the case. For Utilitarianism whether it is simulated or not is not important, the question is how much happiness each of these activities generates compared to doing something else. If it is more, then we ought to do them, if not, we ought not. For the Kantian and virtue ethicist the question is how being involved in simulated killing changes us as a person. If it makes us less able to be a moral agent — e.g. less rational or virtuous — then we ought not to be involved in simulated killing.

However, the main lesson from this chapter is this. Issues surrounding simulated killing are going to be addressed via psychology. Which is thus far inconclusive. So it seems the best we can say is that “yes simulated killing is a moral issue”, but the decision of whether a particular activity is morally right or wrong will be advanced via experimentation.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Simulated killing

Paradox of Tragedy

Higher and lower pleasures

Risk-increasing Acts

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*\*Revision includes deleting a dead link that was included in the original work ( the link was [http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781138793934/A22014/ethical\\_theories/Simulated\\_killing.pdf](http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781138793934/A22014/ethical_theories/Simulated_killing.pdf))*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS ETHICS

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What is a business? Is Christian Aid a business? Is McDonald's? What about a university? This is a difficult and complicated question to answer but let us start from the claim that a business is an organization that buys and sells goods or services for profit.

If I buy some books from a shop, they are goods and the business makes a profit. If I pay the taxi driver to take me to the airport then that is a service and I increase the taxi company's profit.

Maybe then Christian Aid is not a business? Arguably there is no "customer" purchasing a good or a service, whereas McDonald's clearly is a business. But what about a university? Well that is a much harder and more controversial question, and one that we have posed below for you to consider. For any business, whatever its size, the key feature will be that it sells goods or services for profit.

Ethics arises because relationships exist. That is, if there is a relationship then there is a legitimate question of how ought we to behave in that relationship? In a business there are many different relationships and hence we can ask ethical questions regarding each of these relationships. Here are a few examples.

(a) A business has a relationship with its shareholders — the people who own a share of the company. However, if the shareholders want to reduce the wages of the workers so they can get a larger dividend, would they be doing something morally wrong? After all, they might arguably be said in some sense to "own" the business and can do what they want with it.

(b) A business has a relationship with its customers — the people who are buying the goods and services. For instance, if a business knowingly reduces the amount of health advice it provides on its labels in order to increase profits, has it done something morally wrong?

(c) A business has a relationship with its employees. If a business realizes that it can increase productivity by scrapping paternity

leave would it be morally wrong to do so? Conversely, if an employee is privy to some questionable practices and becomes a “whistle-blower” then has she done anything morally wrong?

(d) There are also ethical questions that arise regarding the business’s relationship with the environment. If a business opens a new factory, giving a much needed boost to the local economy, but can only do so by building on a nature reserve, has it done something morally wrong?

(e) Also there are others who are affected by the business’s activity. For example, if a mobile phone company constructs a new phone mast which causes a low hum to be heard by the local community, has the company done something morally wrong?

Of course, businesses have always made ethical decisions. The working conditions in factories before the 1847 Factory Act were certainly morally wrong, even if this was not recognized at the time.

This is in stark contrast to nowadays, when you find “value and ethic” statements in full view on the promotional material of any business. Not to be talking in terms of “values and ethics” is very bad business practice. The phrase that is often used in this context is a business’s “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR). We can take CSR to mean: “[...] a business approach that contributes to sustainable development by delivering economic, social and environmental benefits for all stakeholders”.<sup>1</sup> A great example of a company with a clear CSR is The Body Shop, who in 1988 became the founding member of the Ethical Trading Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

There is now a plethora of ethical rankings that tell the customer which businesses are best in terms of CSR, and which is the most ethical (e.g. Forbes, ‘The World’s Most Ethical Companies’).<sup>3</sup>

Although it is now the norm for a business to have “ethics” statements, it is arguably irrational for companies to be ethical. Why might this be? Consider this basic argument.

1. A business’s aim is to make a profit.
2. A business will make a profit if it can attract customers.



3. In the present context (at least in the West) a business will attract most customers if it appears to be ethical.
4. It will make more profit if it appears ethical rather than actually being ethical because it actually costs more to be ethical rather than simply appearing ethical.

Therefore, given (1)–(4) it seems more reasonable for a business simply to appear to be ethical, rather than actually being ethical.

Of course, there are many questions that arise from the above argument. For instance, we might think that the potential costs of being found out (i.e. appearing but not being ethical) far outweigh the costs of actually being ethical in the first place — hence (4) might be rejected. However, there remains a great attraction only to appear ethical and not go through a long, often expensive process to become ethical. It is of course then an open empirical question whether businesses are ethical or whether it is window dressing and simply a cynical marketing device.

In this chapter we are going to look at a few areas of business ethics and do so through the lens of the normative theories of Utilitarianism and Kantian deontology.

## 2. EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

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In 1992 Mike Ashley started the company Sports Direct; it grew rapidly to become the biggest sports retailer in the UK and one of the biggest in Europe. However, in 2016 the lid was lifted on what seemed to be draconian working practices for its employees and it was revealed that workers were not paid the minimum wage. One employee claimed that, “if we went to the toilet more than once every four hours we were called into the manager’s office and questioned”. “I lasted six days before I quit”.<sup>4</sup> Employees were often searched when leaving the store after work — sometimes having to strip to their underwear. Employees were docked fifteen minutes’ pay for being one minute late. “Sometimes on my zero-

hours contract, I would end up working for ten days in a row, for ten hours a day. On other weeks I would get given only one three-hour shift the whole week. There was no routine".<sup>5</sup>

Did Sports Direct do something morally wrong? To make this a little more manageable, let us put aside the illegality of their behavior. Let's assume that they did nothing illegal in their practice.

Given this we might think that they did not do anything morally wrong. After all, the employees were not press-ganged into working for the company. They were not chained to their desks nor denied access to exits. Employees were not prisoners or slaves but were rational human beings who chose to work for this company. It is plausible that the employees simply failed to read the "small print" in their contracts. In this case why think that the business did anything wrong?

Remember that for an "act utilitarian" an act is morally right if, and only if, it brings about more happiness than any other act, so maybe then Sports Direct did not do anything morally wrong.

In the case of Sports Direct, it might be that the millions of people who gained happiness from owning the cheap sports products outweighed the misery and unhappiness of approximately 27,000 employees. In which case it was morally acceptable for Sports Direct to treat its employees in the way that it did.

Moreover, the act utilitarian has no time for "rights" in general and an "employee's rights" in particular. However, we suspect most people would believe that what Sports Direct did was morally wrong and even if it were legal, people would judge that the company ought not to have acted in the way that it did.

That said perhaps we do not need to draw this conclusion even if we are act utilitarians. This is because Mill said it would be better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. He thought that there were "higher" and "lower" pleasures. Only humans can experience higher pleasure, non-human animals cannot.

Mill argues that pleasure should not just be weighed on the qualitative "hedonic" calculus. If we introduce higher and lower

pleasures, then we can respect the intuition that what Sports Direct did was morally wrong. Mill thought that higher and lower pleasures were qualitatively distinct. If this is true then we might think that the lower pleasures of, say, a million people having a new tennis racket or owning the latest trendy trainers, is outweighed by the higher pleasure of the three quarter of a million employees being treated fairly.

Furthermore, Consequentialist Theories also spell out the “utility” not in terms of happiness or pleasure but in other terms such as welfare and preferences. A preference or welfare consequentialist might then conclude that what Sports Direct did was morally wrong because its actions did not maximize welfare and/or preferences. Investigating this claim, though, would take us well beyond the scope of this chapter.

Moving away from Act Utilitarianism, we might think that the rule utilitarian would claim that the actions of Sports Direct was morally wrong because the rule “treat your employees fairly” is justifiable on utilitarian grounds. That is, people will typically be happier if this rule is followed than if it is not. Hence, a rule-utilitarian might conclude that what Sports Direct did was morally wrong as arguably Sports Direct did not treat its employees fairly.

What is important then is to realize that it is not as clear-cut as saying that a utilitarian would believe that a certain business practice is morally right or wrong. Rather it will depend on the specifics of the situation and how, according to the position, we should maximize pleasure, happiness, well-being, preferences etc.

So much for the utilitarians, what about the Kantians? Well, the Kantian talks in terms of duty and Categorical Imperatives; for the Kantian it is always morally wrong to treat someone as solely a means to an end.

On first look, we might think that this is precisely what Sports Direct did in treating its employees as a means to an end (profit). But it cannot be that simple. For if this were true then all businesses

would be doing something morally wrong because all businesses use their employees to make a profit.

We need to think a bit harder about what Kant is saying. Kant is not saying that businesses cannot use people as a means to an end but that the key is whether the business is treating people as rational and free.

Using a taxi is not morally wrong even though we are using the taxi driver for our own end. This is because we pay the taxi driver and they are voluntarily entering into this means-end relationship. The same then could be said for the employees in a business. Sure, it is true that McDonald's, or Ford, or Body Shop are using their employees as a means to an end but this is acceptable because they pay their employees and their employees are entering the contract of work freely.

Perhaps though the Kantian would say that Sports Direct is different because it practiced a form of exploitation. The people working for Sports Direct are very often from the poorest group of society. This means they do not have lots of jobs to pick from so it is not as if they could leave the job and quickly find another. Moreover, we might suppose that in leaving the job they might end up in a situation which is far worse, perhaps not being able to pay their rent, being on the street, having relationships break down.

In this case, we might wonder if the employees really are freely choosing to work for Sports Direct. If they are not, then Sports Direct is treating its employees as means-to-an-end even though it is paying them. In which case the Kantians would say that what was happening is morally wrong. We'll look at other features of the Kantian position when we consider other issues below.

### 3. BUSINESSES AND CUSTOMERS

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It is clear that businesses can directly affect how a customer thinks about goods or services, the world around them, and themselves. If they could not then they would not spend millions of pounds on

advertising each year! But given this then they occupy a position of trust. With this trust comes a question regarding how much information a company should provide to the customer and in what form.

In 2011 a court decision meant that banks had to compensate millions of people after they had been mis-sold Payment Protection Insurance (PPI) which was judged to be “ineffective and inefficient”. It is beyond doubt that banks knew that PPI was a con, yet it was not in their interest to stop selling PPI because it was “a cash cow”. In order to sell PPI banks tapped into the insecurity of customers by promising a “safety net”. PPI promised to repay people’s borrowings if their income fell due to illness or job loss.

We might think that here is a case where a business’s actions towards the customer is morally wrong. But how might we explain this? Well, one obvious way of explaining it is via trust. As Doug Taylor, who works for “Which?”, stated: “We’ve always known that people were being mis-sold PPI, but we were still amazed to discover the scale of it. It appears that salespeople are chasing their commissions, their bosses are chasing profits — where’s the sense of responsibility to the customer?”<sup>6</sup>

But how far does this “responsibility” reach? It is of course not in a business’s interest — that of making a profit — to give the customer a balanced and “honest” viewpoint. An advert for a computer that says: “this is very expensive; you are probably just buying the label. You do realize that the statistics say you’ll use approximately 5% of its capacity, probably for games, a bit of word processing and surfing the web” will probably not get the company very far in terms of sales. So it seems unfair to compel businesses to be honest and balanced in this way.

But on the other hand a company cannot lie. This of course is why the “horsemeat” scandal and other “food fraud” cases have been so controversial.<sup>7</sup> It may be that people would choose to eat horsemeat but the trouble arises when they are deceived into

eating it. These were cases where food companies deliberately lied, or deceived the customer for profit.

But what is lying? Well, it is not when someone fails to tell the truth but rather it involves intentional deception. But why ought companies refrain from lying?

Looking at Act Utilitarianism account it is quite hard to say why it would always be wrong to do so. Presumably, for the act utilitarian, it is not always morally wrong for a business to lie and to exploit the trust of the customer. If, by lying, a business produces more happiness than by not lying, then it is morally acceptable for the business to lie.

We might not think that we would get the same result for the rule utilitarian. A plausible rule might be “do not lie in a position of trust where there are reasonable grounds that you’ll be found out”. If this were justifiable through utilitarian grounds, then it would be unacceptable for businesses to lie to the customer. Yet, even on the rule utilitarian account it is true that it is sometimes morally acceptable for a business to lie.

This contrasts with the Kantian approach. If you recall, for the Kantian it is always morally wrong to lie. It is true in all instances that one ought not to lie. Kant uses the Categorical Imperative to show this. Let us reconsider the PPI case. It would be irrational for the head of a bank to want the maxim “lie to the customer if it means making a profit” to become a universal law. It is irrational because if this is a universal law then there would be no trust in businesses at all and therefore there could be no profit and no businesses. It is self-defeating and irrational. So it seems that on Kantian grounds the way that PPI was sold was morally wrong.

#### 4. A BUSINESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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As we discussed above it is common parlance among businesses to talk about Corporate Social Responsibility; in other words, a business works with the goal not just of profit but to be in step with

the issues of society as a whole. Typically, though not exhaustively, this amounts to the business being ethically responsible towards the environment; this might include things such as not testing its cosmetics on animals or reducing the amount of non-recyclable plastic bags that the company uses.

But why should a business have any obligation to the environment? If a business is working within the law but using, say, environmentally unfriendly cement in the construction of its factories, why does this matter? Why should a business use a potentially more expensive product, thus reducing its profits, simply because it is more environmentally friendly?

It is true that the environment is one of the biggest concerns for businesses and is often an area where they are heavily criticized. This, like many of the other ethical issues, is only a relatively new phenomenon. In the past, in the name of profit, businesses could do what they wanted regarding the environment. There was a view that the world is such a massive place that a business polluting a pond, or mining on a green space did not really, in the grand scheme of things, matter. But the increase in globalization, the advancement of science, and the fact we live in connected communities has made people realize that businesses can, and do, affect the environment; climate change and the hole in the ozone layer are prime examples of this slow realization.

We can bring some of the issues into focus through an example:

In 2000 heavy snow caused the collapse of a dam in Romania. The dam was holding back 100,000 cubic meters of cyanide-contaminated water. The water spilled over some farmland and then into the Someş river. Although no humans were killed the spill caused the death of a huge amount of aquatic life and the accident has been called the biggest environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl. The cyanide water was a by-product of the mining of gold by the Aurul mining company.

Did the company do something morally wrong? It might have done something illegal; perhaps it omitted to perform the

appropriate load tests, or perhaps it forged safety documentation. But even if it did nothing illegal, did it do something morally wrong?

I suspect in the twenty-first century our answer will be “obviously yes!” But can we give any substance to this thought? What really is wrong? After all, we intentionally kill billions of fish and aquatic life for food every year.

What would we say if we are utilitarians? Well we cannot talk about environmental rights, for there are no rights and again we might find it hard to show why this was morally wrong if we are utilitarians. We might think that the gold produced might cause a lot of happiness, not least because it is used in jewelry, computers, electronics, dentistry, medicine etc. The fish, plants, and other aquatic life do not have a comparably high level of pleasure or happiness compared to humans so all things being equal it might not be morally wrong. Of course, as with the other cases this will depend on how we spell out the details of the case but Utilitarianism does not appear to be as clear-cut as we perhaps might have hoped.

For the Kantian, we only have moral obligations towards rational agents and thus there is no such thing as a business’s moral obligation towards the environment, as the environment is not a rational agent. Now this does not mean that Kant believes a business can do whatever it wants towards the environment.

If a business treats the environment as a means to an end (profit) then they are modelling a certain type of behavior and this behavior could then lead to businesses treating humans as a means to an end, which is wrong. So although the exploitation of the environment is not morally wrong for the Kantian, it legitimizes and hence increases the possibility of exploitation of people, which is.

## 5. BUSINESS AND GLOBALIZATION

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The world is getting smaller and it is increasingly easy to contact



and work with people across the world. Whereas in the past a UK business might set its sights on reaching a few cities in the UK, businesses now have greater international opportunities. This brings a whole host of new ethical issues but rather than apply our moral theories to these issues, we will leave this to the reader. The aim in this section is to start you thinking about some of the issues.

Nike, Gap, M&S, H&M, Walmart, Nestlé and many more companies have been exposed as using child labor. Although this may not be illegal in the country where the children were used, people think it is very wrong. But is it? Consider this quotation from a Cameroonian father who is also a farmer: “[child labor] is considered as part of the household chores children do to help their parents. I do not consider this child abuse because we are making money that is used to pay their school fees”.<sup>8</sup>

We can understand then that a local rural economy may well be wholly dependent on the use of child labor and therefore a blanket ban on child labor would have a directly negative effect on the livelihoods of a large number of people. But how much then are “western ideals” simply idiosyncratic? Should there be a complete ban or is it the case that:

A global ban [...] shows disrespect for other cultures by imposing a western mindset as to the economic role of children. A more sensible policy would be to apply some basic rules of humane working conditions in conjunction with a targeted, evolving approach that duly considers the actual outcomes of implemented measures.<sup>9</sup>

Or consider another issue. As we said, it was not until quite recently that there has been a move to make businesses more environmentally friendly. During the industrial revolution in the UK there was no such requirement. Now consider businesses in “developing” countries. They are often trying to start from scratch with very poor infrastructure and a poor understanding of the environmental impact of their work. In fact, the West imposing their environmental standards on businesses would effectively stop

such businesses developing and may lead to their collapse. If a farmer in Kenya has not only got to produce crops, but has to do so in a more expensive “environmentally friendly” way then that farmer might struggle to survive. What right then do businesses in the West have to impose these environmental standards on businesses in other less affluent countries?

There are many other examples of the ethical issues that come with the increase in globalization. In general, these arise when there is a clash of cultures. For example, some cultures operate by using bribes; what then should businesses do within that culture? What about when a Western business is located in a culture which treats women as second class citizens; how should the business treat their female employees and successfully operate? The general question then is how far can we impose — if at all — Western business ethics in non-Western contexts?

## SUMMARY

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The label “business ethics” is relatively new. The customer is now very sensitive to how “ethical” a business is and thus any signs of moral wrongdoing by a business will lead to a slump in profits. This leads to a general question whether there is any incentive to be — rather than simply appearing to be — ethical.

One question that we have not yet addressed is whether capitalism — the environment needed for businesses to exist — is itself immoral? Marx, and many others, certainly thought that a system that leads us to seek after more money and more material goods will crush and stunt human flourishing.

If our function as humans involves devoting time to being healthy, being with friends and family, developing hobbies and skills, educating ourselves etc., then the “for profit” mentality of capitalism could be seen as not allowing us to fulfill this role.

The essence of capitalism is to turn nature into commodities and commodities into capital. The live green earth is transformed into

dead gold bricks, with luxury items for the few and toxic slag heaps for the many. The glittering mansion overlooks a vast sprawl of shanty towns, wherein a desperate, demoralized humanity is kept in line with drugs, television, and armed force.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps then the most ethical response to business is to refuse to play the capitalist game of business in the first place and to rethink what “business” might mean and how a “business” should act.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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Goods

Services

Stakeholders

Corporate Social Responsibility

Whistleblowing

Capitalism

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9 *Ibid.* Here and hereafter the emphasis is ours unless otherwise stated.

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## *Eating Animals*

## EATING ANIMALS



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therefore, if he eats meat, he participates in taking animal life merely for the sake of his appetite. And to act so is immoral.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. EATING ANIMALS INTRODUCTION

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The British, and many other nations, have something of an odd relationship with animals. I have, for example, just returned to begin typing up this chapter after adding extra straw for my chickens — chickens that I care for on a daily basis and chickens in whose well-being I am invested. This, however, followed on from my enjoyable consumption of a chicken dinner last night, a fact that would seem to suggest I am far less invested in the well-being of chickens more generally. This oddness in terms of the relationship between myself and my chickens is not, however, peculiar to me. Few people in the United States are vegetarians, such as \* the data suggests about 5 percent are vegetarians.<sup>2</sup> I have no doubt that many more people would claim to identify as animal lovers. In this chapter, the applied ethical issue of the moral acceptability of eating animals is considered; it remains to be seen what conclusions might be drawn to be either justify or condemn some aspects of our multi-faceted behavior and attitude towards animals.

## 2. JUSTIFYING MEAT EATING

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It seems sensible to begin by considering on what grounds the eating of meat might be morally justified. To this end, two possible justifications are considered below.

### Comparative Justification

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It is hard to give a proper name to this oft-cited justification for the consumption of animal meat. When questioned as to why meat-eating is morally acceptable, a fairly common reply relates to the

comparison between humans as meat-eaters and other animals as meat-eaters. So, just as lions eat gazelles, bears eat salmon and foxes eat chickens (if they can get their paws on them), so humans eat pigs/cows/sheep etc. Given that it would be odd, even for the most ardent vegetarian, for us to morally criticize the lion, the bear or the fox, then it might seem to follow that there is a moral equivalence between the actions of these different species that extends to the actions of non-vegetarian human beings, such that we too should be free from moral criticism in our consumption of meat.

However, possible weaknesses in the above response should not be too challenging to identify. For one, we do not often base our moral judgments regarding the acceptability of certain actions on the behaviors of lions, bears and foxes etc. Indeed, the fact that lions sometimes eat human beings does not suggest to us that eating other humans may be morally acceptable. In addition, those who find eating some types of meat more acceptable than eating other types of meat (chicken as more acceptable than gorilla, for example) will find limited resource in this type of justification. If there is some merit in this blunt argument for meat-eating, it will very likely need to be brought out more precisely and sharply, perhaps within the context of a wider normative ethical theory.

### **Dominion-Based Justification**

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The second justification we will consider for meat-eating may have slightly more going for it, depending on your wider outlook on the world. According to the Bible, “[...] the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being”.<sup>3</sup> This verse is often interpreted as God providing man with a soul, and thus differentiating mankind from the rest of animal creation. In addition, after “the Flood”, God says that “[everything] that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green



plants, I now give you everything”.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore apparently quite clear that God has no objection to the eating of animals, although a number of Christians do opt for a vegetarian lifestyle for a variety of other factors (the fact that something is allowable does not make it necessarily desirable).

In the remainder of this chapter, however, we consider the ethical issues surrounding meat-eating from the perspective of Utilitarianism, Kantian Ethics and Aristotelian Virtue Ethics; theories in which Biblical references are not central for deciding how to act. Thus, although a religious ethic focusing on Biblical teaching may seem to provide a clear answer on the justification of eating animals.

### 3. ACT UTILITARIANISM

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Utilitarianism comes in a variety of different forms — Act, Rule and Preference Utilitarianism as suggested by Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer respectively. It might seem that the views of Jeremy Bentham and other act utilitarians, when it comes to the acceptability of eating animals, would be fairly simple to ascertain. The act utilitarian of a Benthamite variety simply seeks to secure the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of people. Although Bentham holds to the idea of equal consideration of interests — the pleasures of a queen should count no more than the pleasures of a peasant, irrespective of their social standing and societal power — this notion of equality might be thought of as applying to human beings only. If understood in this way, the view of the act utilitarian would be clear, as the pleasure of a human being when eating a beef burger would outweigh any morally relevant pain. After all, on this version of the equal consideration of interests, any pain that might be suffered by the cow would not have any moral weight in deciding how to maximize total pleasure.

However, Bentham did not adopt this anthropocentric (human-

centered) approach to the principle of equal consideration. In one of his most famous passages, he states that:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been [withheld] from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the [pelvic bone] are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate [...]. The question is not, 'Can they reason?' nor, 'Can they talk?' but, 'Can they suffer?'<sup>5</sup>

In this passage, Bentham makes it clear that animals cannot be excluded from the calculation of total pains and total pleasures associated with a particular act just because of their inability to talk or their deficient rational capacities in comparison to human beings. On the contrary, so long as an animal does experience some suffering or pain, then this suffering or pain must be factored into the calculation determining which act will produce the greatest pleasure for the greatest number; simply put, all suffering creatures — human or not — are part of the group of morally relevant beings.

This idea of equality of consideration for animals is justified by Bentham in the initial section of the passage, where a comparison to the ethical failing of racism is drawn. Bentham says that skin color is deemed to be a morally irrelevant feature of an individual and affords no reason to ignore their pains or pleasures. So, just as denying moral relevance based on skin color or race is arbitrary, and just as we in the contemporary world believe that denying moral relevance based on gender is arbitrary, denying moral relevance based on species alone is also arbitrary. If what matters is pain and pleasure, then the species that acts as host to that pain and pleasure would seem to be irrelevant.

Bentham's openness to weighing the pains and pleasures of

animals in utilitarian decision-making has made him a heroic figure in animal rights and animal welfare movements. Whether you agree with Bentham or not, his views were certainly somewhat out of kilter with many of his philosophical contemporaries. For example, just a little over a century earlier, one of the most respected philosophers of all-time — René Descartes — was, according to some accounts, cutting open his wife's pet dog after nailing the poor creature to the wall in order to study its mechanistic movements. For Descartes, there was no moral issue in this type of action, since a soulless animal such as a dog could not feel pain and only mimicked the appearance of genuine pain. Bentham, had he known of Descartes actions, would have likely recoiled at the inability to recognize the morally relevant pains of the dog.

By putting the individual pieces of his theorizing together, we can come to the view that Bentham would count the pains and pleasures of animals as morally relevant when considering the acceptability of eating animals, and he would seemingly count those pains and pleasures as just as valuable as the pains and pleasures of human beings given his commitment to a principle of equality when counting pains and pleasures. Thus, if the total pain (including pain suffered by animals) associated with acts of meat-eating were to outweigh the total pleasure associated with such acts, then Bentham and Benthamite philosophers would be forced to conclude that those instances of meat-eating were morally wrong.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that the language used in the paragraph above is important. Neither Bentham nor any other relativistic utilitarian would ever comment that eating animals is absolutely right or absolutely wrong. For now it is worth reminding ourselves that the act utilitarian is interested only in working out how to bring about the good in each individual situation. Thus, meat-eating may be morally acceptable on this view if a research scientist, close to curing cancer, needs to eat a healthy dog in

order to survive long enough to pass his research on. On the other hand, eating a turkey burger produced cheaply and with much suffering to the animal may not be justifiable because the pleasure associated with consumption is so minimal. These are, of course, “cardboard cut-out” cases, some distance from real-world ethical decision making in the context of Act Utilitarianism and eating animals. However, it will be of far greater benefit for you to consider the range of cases in which Act Utilitarianism may speak against eating animals, and the range of cases in which Act Utilitarianism will speak in favor of eating animals, in order for you to form either a robust critique or defense of the application of this theory in this applied context. Does Act Utilitarianism seem to provide the right sort of decision procedure, with the right sorts of conclusions?

#### 4. CHALLENGES TO BENTHAM

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One challenge to Bentham’s act utilitarian view may be based upon the idea that the making of a moral distinction between animals and human beings is far from arbitrary and that there is a difference between such a “speciesist” (Peter Singer made this term famous) distinction and discriminatory thought-processes such as racism and sexism. Perhaps it is the case that the pleasures and pains of human beings are worth more, in virtue of our intellect or our capacity for higher-order thinking and experience.

However, we should be cautious when responding to Bentham in this way. Consider an elderly human being who is suffering from dementia, or a two-month-old baby, or a patient in a Persistent Vegetative State. All three of these individuals would seem to be lacking in rational capacity to fairly serious levels. To this end, in the portion of text removed from original Bentham quote, Bentham says that a “full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, those who seek to

draw a line in the sand in terms of rationality, a line that separates human beings from animals, a line that might justify eating those below the line but not those above the line, are faced with a seemingly insurmountable dilemma — either rationality is morally relevant and so some humans lack moral standing, or rationality is not morally relevant and this attempt to separate humans from animals is a failure.

In order to overcome this problem, a potentiality argument may be put forward. Since babies of two months have the potential to become more rational than they currently are, and since this applies to dementia patients and PVS patients also if successful treatment could be discovered and administered, then the morally relevant line in the sand between humans and animals may be redrawn on the basis that all humans have potentially higher rational skills that any non-human animal has.

However, Singer has a clever response to this potentiality suggestion, which is clear if we consider the powers of Prince Charles. Whilst he is a potential king, Prince Charles is currently only a prince. This means that, at the moment, he has only the rights of a prince, not a king. He will not earn kingly rights until he actually becomes a king. Analogously, although a two-month-old is potentially more rational than a dog or a horse, they should not acquire any extra moral consideration until that potential is actualized. Therefore, any attempt to morally separate animals and humans on grounds of rationality or intellect is again seemingly confronted by the dilemma as stated in the previous paragraph.

## 5. UTILITARIAN REASONS FOR EATING ANIMALS

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The previous two sections should make clear that for utilitarians such as Bentham and Singer, there will be times when it is morally wrong to eat animals; when the pain associated with eating animals outweighs any corresponding pleasure. It is worth noting, however, that Singer is very clear that eating animals can be entirely morally

justifiable, and not just in extremely unlikely situations. It is true that Singer is scornful of the moral acceptability of eating factory-farmed foods, as the following quote suggests:

These arguments [relating to the moral relevance of pains afflicting animals] apply to animals who have been reared in factory farms — which means that we should not eat chicken, pork or veal, unless we know that the meat we are eating was not produced by factory farm methods.<sup>7</sup>

Singer also objects to the consumption of eggs that are not sourced from free-range chickens; the same would presumably apply to the eating of the chicken itself. However, this type of objection to the eating of particular animals, in particular conditions, does point us towards the situations in which meat-eating may be morally acceptable to a preference utilitarian such as Singer. If chickens, for example, are allowed to roam freely, before being painlessly killed (something that seems entirely possible, even if this is not what is always achieved in reality), then the balance of preference satisfaction may swing in favor of the hungry family seeking a healthy diet and away from the continued existence of the chicken itself — chickens, as those who deal with them will know, are unlikely to have the mental capacity to have long running future preferences that will go unfulfilled if their lives are cut short.

Indeed, even Bentham himself supported the idea of eating animals, despite all that was suggested earlier. Animals farmed and killed, thought Bentham, may suffer far less pain than animals left to die in the harsh reality of the unmanaged wilderness. Well-managed and quickly administered slaughter may lead to less pain than starvation, disease or violent death after the attack of a predator.

In an ever changing world, where the practices associated with animal slaughter vary from company to company and culture to culture, the utilitarian cannot provide a clear-cut answer on the

general acceptability of eating animals. Singer sums this up when he says that:

[...] the important question is not whether animal flesh could be produced without suffering, but whether the flesh we are considering buying was produced without suffering. Unless we can be confident that it was, the principle of equal consideration of interests implies that it was wrong to sacrifice important interests of the animal in order to satisfy less important interests of our own; consequently we should boycott the end result of this process.<sup>8</sup>

The various criticisms applied to Utilitarianism — objections based on demandingness, or based on issues of calculation of pleasures or preferences, for example — are not irrelevant in this chapter. However, for the sake of avoiding repetition, you should consider the application of these criticisms yourself when coming to your view regarding the potential success of utilitarian (act and preference) responses to eating animals.

Given the previous comments, it may be suggested that the lack of discussion of Mill and Rule Utilitarianism, as well as a discussion of higher and lower pleasures, is a critical omission from this chapter. In a sense, we agree. However, once the issues regarding the application of Utilitarianism to the act of eating animals have been set out as above, then applying rule-utilitarian-style thinking should be a far easier task. For now, the following issues are suggested for consideration.

1. Is meat-eating a higher or lower pleasure? Does it make a difference if lamb is consumed in a greasy-spoon café, or if it is prepared by a world-renowned chef? Should the moral acceptability of eating an animal turn on the way in which an animal is prepared for consumption?
2. Are animals worth less than humans because they cannot access higher pleasures?
3. Would an outright ban on factory farming be a rule that, if universalized, would lead to the greatest good for the

greatest number? What other rules might be advocated by a rule utilitarian in this applied ethical setting?

Answering these questions should provide a solid grasp of utilitarian thinking in this area.

## 6. KANTIAN ETHICS AND EATING ANIMALS

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According to Immanuel Kant, a human being is “[...] a being altogether different in rank and dignity from things, such as irrational animals, with which one may deal and dispose at one’s discretion”.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the idea that humans have no responsibility to animals, and therefore may seemingly consume them at will, is open to the same objections as outlined in section 4. However, putting those concerns to one side, it may then seem as though Kant has given us a usefully clear statement of his ethical thinking as it may be applied in this context.

Kant is clear that we have no Direct Duties towards animals because the eating of animals does not fall foul of the two formulations of the Categorical Imperative. The eating of animals can become a universal law, as there is no issue with either conceiving this action as being universalized or willing the universalizing of this action. In addition, eating animals does not itself entail the treating of another person merely as a means to an end (and Kant is clear that animals exist themselves only as a mean to an end <sup>10</sup>). Of course, we may treat a person merely as a means to an end in seeking to secure food, but there is nothing necessary about this taking place when animals are consumed. Thus, eating animals will generally be permissible and will only be impermissible when we act wrongly towards a fellow human being in securing our food — the animal itself is not relevant to the assessment of our duty.

Yet, for all of the above, Kant does encourage us to treat animals with care and concern rather than with no consideration at all,



despite our lack of a direct duty to care for them. Kant says of a person that “[if] he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men”.<sup>11</sup> Those who are needlessly cruel to animals, who kill wantonly or who treat animals with scant regard for their suffering, become familiar with this approach to life and will be, as a result, less likely to act in accordance with duty in their dealings with other human beings. Our duty to animals, says Kant, is therefore indirect rather than direct — it exists only in so far as it pays out in our dealings with our fellow humans.

In terms of applying this line of thought to eating animals, Kant would have no objection so long as we were not cruel or unkind in our approach. Perhaps it is the case that the eating of factory-farmed foods could be considered an act, or an endorsement of, cruelty. In any case, it seems that, rather ironically, Singer and Kant end up in much the same position when it comes to advice regarding how to act in the sphere of eating animals.

It is worthwhile noting, finally, that contemporary Kantians such as Christine Korsgaard (1952–) have objected to Kant’s own disregarding of the notion of Direct Duties towards animals. Korsgaard does not accept that it is permissible or acceptable to treat a pain-experiencing creature merely as a means to an end, since “[...] it is a pain to be in pain. And that is not a trivial fact”.<sup>12</sup> It therefore may be an open question whether Kantians should allow for Direct Duties to animals, even if Kant himself did not.

## 7. VIRTUE ETHICS AND EATING ANIMALS

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Being an agent-centered moral theory, it would be a misunderstanding of Virtue Ethics to expect absolute moral answers on the ethical acceptability of eating animals. Rather than attempting to make ethical judgments on the morality of specific instances of eating animals, Virtue Ethics instead opts to discuss

the dispositions and character traits associated with virtuous people, who then may provide guidance when it comes to whether or not the virtuous person would eat no animals at all, just some animals, or all animals on offer.

From the explanation of Virtue Ethics, we should draw the following important lesson from the outset. It is not possible that vegetarianism could be a virtue in and of itself, since vegetarianism is a way of life rather than a character trait or a disposition. Rather, if we are to follow virtue-ethical thinking, we should ask in what circumstances and at what times would a disposition to refrain from eating meat be virtuous, and when such a disposition might be labelled as a vice of excess or deficiency.

Rosalind Hursthouse draws interesting comparisons between the arguments of Singer in this area and the approach of the virtue ethicist.<sup>13</sup> Hursthouse suggests that Singer, in arguing against cruelty to animals from his preference utilitarian perspective, provides evidence in favor of the view that the eating of animals will often reflect a vice-like character trait rather than a virtuous character trait. Given that many of us are aware, when we purchase our meat, that the animal in question may have led a rather unpleasant existence, our willingness to ignore this information hardly coheres neatly with exercising the virtuous mean of compassion in the sphere of life of shopping or making dietary decisions; willful ignorance may be viewed as vice of deficiency.

The example above of shopping in the value aisle for our food puts the issue of eating animals into a particular setting, perhaps the choice of cheap chicken for dinner rather than a more expensive and less attractive vegetarian alternative. However, it is not difficult to conceive of a situation in which meat-eating might be considered to be the result of a virtuous characteristic, such as the eating of an animal in order to promote the health of your children when other options are unavailable (perhaps through economic factors). In this setting, a stubborn commitment to vegetarianism over and above a clear-headed recognition of the

needs of your children may represent an action based on a vice of excess. (Roger Scruton is one virtue ethicist who speaks of the virtue of meat-eating; his ideas are worth exploring for a slightly different virtue-ethical response to this issue).<sup>14</sup>

Of course, rather than the specific study of virtuous responses in two outlined cases, it would be useful to have more general guidance. Again, focussing on promoting compassionate rather than cruel decision-making when it comes to choosing whether or not to eat animals, Hursthouse says:

[...] we need a substantial change in our outlook to get any further — in virtue ethicists' terms, a clearly seen and effective recognition of the fact that human beings, and thereby human lives, are not only interwoven with each other but with the rest of nature. Then, and only then, will we apply virtue ethics correctly to what we are doing.<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle was more concerned with the application of the virtues as they pertained to human conduct, but human flourishing is supposed to be a whole-life process and it is therefore not without motivation to focus on our dispositions towards animals as Hursthouse does. Whether this guidance is an accurate interpretation of Aristotelian ideas, or whether it is an independently advantageous extension of Aristotelian ideas, is something that is worth reflecting on in the context of the virtues as actually outlined by Aristotle. A key question to answer is whether or not Hursthouse's reasoning is in line with core Aristotelian thinking, or has she created a rival version of Virtue Ethics?

Of the criticisms that might be applied to Virtue Ethics, the objection from unclear guidance may seem highly troubling, even in spite of the ideas above. Considering the following three issues may help you to clarify your thoughts as to the practical usefulness of Virtue Ethics for deciding how to act in this setting.

1. Who are the virtuous role models from whom we can learn when it comes to eating animals? TV chefs, who

Speak of “doing justice to the animal” when cooking it? Vegetarian campaigners? Peter Singer?

2. TV presenters such as Bear Grylls and Ed Stafford are often dropped into inhospitable locations for our entertainment, and can only survive by killing animals for food. Does their killing reflect a virtue, or a vice?
3. Angela is a vegetarian who is eating with a friend at a highly expensive restaurant. Angela’s friend has paid for dinner, and has chosen the courses to eat. One dish involves the eating of carefully prepared duck. Would it be virtuous for Angela to eat the duck, or to stand by her beliefs even in an extreme situation? (It is worth researching Singer’s idea of the “Paris Exemption” to develop your answer.)

If you can answer these questions, you should feel more confident in terms of your ability to apply virtue ethical thinking to the issue of eating animals.

## 8. CORA DIAMOND

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To conclude this chapter, we will briefly reflect on the ideas of Cora Diamond, who offers a perspective on the ethical acceptability of eating animals that stands apart from the normative ethical theory-based views hitherto discussed.<sup>16</sup> Much of the focus in this chapter has been on the question of whether animals are morally relevant, or whether they have rights to the same degree as humans when it comes to considering the ethical acceptability of consuming them. Diamond objects to this approach entirely and does not seek to criticize the morality of eating animals via talk of moral rights; she has a different kind of criticism altogether.

For Diamond, the notion of “moral rights” for animals is irrelevant when it comes to explaining the moral acceptability of eating animals, because we make decisions in other spheres of life that

eating certain entities is unacceptable without any associated talk of rights. Specifically, Diamond suggests that our aversion to eating the human dead is not based on the moral right of the dead body not to be eaten, but because we feel uncomfortable at the very mention of the possibility of consuming human dead bodies, or amputated human limbs. This uncomfortableness is explained not by talk of rights, but by the idea that “a person is not something to eat”. This is a thought that comes about because of the nature of our interactions with human beings and human body parts in our lives.<sup>17</sup>

Extending this line of thinking to the issue of eating animals, Diamond takes issue with the following line of argument:

If

You would not eat human beings

and

You would not eat your pets

then

You should not eat other animals (at least higher primates, perhaps) because there is no meaningful difference between such animals and things that you would not eat.

For Diamond, such an argument is extremely unpersuasive. This is because it misses, in its cold and logical form, the fact that pets, like dead human bodies and amputated human limbs, are also not things to be eaten. As Diamond says, pets are given names, we let them into our houses and we interact with them in ways that we do not with wild animals. Wild animals may be things to eat, just as a chicken on display in a supermarket is something for me to eat whereas my own chickens in the garden are not.

This approach may be appealing to a non-cognitivist, anti-realist interpretation of moral thought and moral talk. We might wonder if the cries of the campaigner regarding the moral status of certain animals as “things not to eat” are designed to pick up on genuinely existing moral properties in the world as the cognitivist or realist

would like, or whether these calls reflect a non-cognitivist, perhaps an emotivist-style, attitude.

However, Diamond herself holds a vegetarian position that she thinks can be advanced, not by cold and logical arguments as previously identified, and not by talk of moral rights, but by reshaping our relationship with animals to add to the list of things not to be eaten. To this end, Diamond offers a Jane Legge poem, *Learning to be a Dutiful Carnivore*, as an exemplar of tactics that may be far more effective for securing movements towards vegetarianism:

Dogs and cats and goats and cows,  
Ducks and chickens, sheep and sows  
Woven into tales for tots,  
Pictured on their walls and pots.  
Time for dinner! Come and eat  
All your lovely, juicy meat.  
One day ham from Percy Porker  
(In the comics he's a corker),  
Then the breast from Mrs Cluck  
Or the wing from Donald Duck.  
Liver next from Clara Cow  
(No, it doesn't hurt her now).  
Yes, that leg's from Peter Rabbit  
Chew it well; make that a habit.  
Eat the creatures killed for sale,  
But never pull the pussy's tail.  
Eat the flesh from "filthy hogs"  
But never be unkind to dogs.  
Grow up into double-think  
Kiss the hamster; skin the mink.  
Never think of slaughter, dear,  
That's why animals are here.  
They only come on earth to die,  
So eat your meat, and don't ask why.<sup>18</sup>

This poem, says Diamond, does not preach a form of behavior, but instead challenges assumed beliefs regarding which animals are acceptable sources of food and which are not. If we view animals as fellow creatures rather than as objects for consumption, then we may change our relationship with them such that killing and eating them will seem as out of bounds as consuming a dead human being. Cannibalism is not always viewed as being morally wrong, of course, as difficult situations will change our perspective; most of the time, however, we recoil at this possible act without the need for formal utilitarian or Kantian justifications.

Diamond's paper is worth your careful attention, and she responds to a challenge that her line of argument opposing unethical treatment of animals might create unfortunate analogies with ways in which we should oppose sexism and racism. In cases of sexism and racism, we might hope that moral rights justify fair and equal treatment, rather than the mere fact that we might happen to see people as fellow creatures (a fact that appears to depend on us, and not the person who should have the moral right). We might suggest that our recoiling at racial discrimination follows from the moral right a person has, not that our recoiling is what makes such discrimination morally wrong. Whether you find Diamond's approach compelling or not matters more, in all likelihood, than whether you agree with her conclusions; if her method is sound, then does this show a weakness in the approaches of the normative theories based on reference to rights or duties?

## SUMMARY

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Few moral theorists will claim that eating animals is absolutely and completely acceptable in all circumstances and at all times. Even Kant recoiled at the idea of cruelty to animals in spite of his expressed denial that humans possess any duty towards animals. This fact suggests that conclusions regarding the ethical

acceptability of eating animals may often be determined by empirical and real-world data regarding the preferences, pains or pleasures of animals and the impact of the processes of rearing and then slaughtering animals for human consumption. The real-world situation is constantly in flux, but this chapter should provide you with the moral framework into which real-world research can be plugged, in order to explain the different key theories, as well as coming to your own viewpoint.

## KEY TERMINOLOGY

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### Speciesism

Equal consideration of interests

Direct Duties

Indirect Duties

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*\*A revision was made to update data used in the original source that reflected percentage of vegetarians in the UK, where the revision uses data to reflect a percentage of vegetarians in the United States.*



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## *Application of Ethical Theory Assignment*

### **Application of Ethical Theory Assignment**

DEBORAH HOLT, BS, MA AND PAUL KNOEPFLER TEDXVIENNA  
THE ETHICAL DILEMMA OF DESIGNER BABIES  
HTTPS://WWW.TED.COM/TALKS/  
PAUL\_KNOEPFLER\_THE\_ETHICAL\_DILEMMA\_OF\_DESIGNER\_BABI  
ES

1. Watch Paul Knoepfler's Ted Talk *The Ethical Dilemma of Designer Babies*. (18 minutes and twenty-three seconds in length)



A video element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can watch it online here: <https://viva.pressbooks.pub/phi220ethics/?p=661>

Closed Captions are available and the transcript is available for download by clicking here [Paul Knoepfler TEDxVienna The Ethical Dilemma of Designer Babies](#)

2. Identify the ethical dilemma being presented. To do this, you will need to identify the conflicting values that make this situation an ethical dilemma. (Hint: What is the overarching moral conflict that you have identified in the presentation?)
3. Next, you need to identify the stakeholders. To do this, you will need to identify people or groups of people who are impacted by the ethical dilemma. (Hint: Who is impacted by the moral conflict and any possible resolves to this conflict?)
4. Application of three ethical theories. To complete this part of the assignment, it is important that you apply each ethical theory separately to the dilemma. To apply ethical theory, you need to consider the questions associated with each specific ethical theory and use the characteristics of the specific ethical theory to develop a response to the question:
  1. Utilitarianism – “What would a utilitarian say should be done and why?” *With utilitarianism, the focus is on the end results or consequences, and a utilitarian would do what would bring about the greatest happiness/pleasure for the greatest number of stakeholders.*
  2. Deontology/ Kantian perspective ( the principle of universalizability, which is also known as deontology) – “What would a deontologist say should be done and why?” *With deontology, the focus is on the action/decision itself. Do not forget to consider Kant’s Categorical Imperative when*

*determining how a deontologist would respond to the ethical dilemma.*

3. Virtue Ethics – “What would a virtue ethicist say should be done and why?” *It is important to remember that the focus of virtue ethics is person/agent centered versus action centered, which means that the virtue ethicist focuses on how the resolve to the ethical dilemma will offer the opportunity for the development of positive character traits/virtues. With virtue ethics, the hope is that by focusing on the development of positive character traits in oneself and others, is that naturally right/good action will follow. When making a decision on how to respond to an ethical dilemma, a virtue ethicist would focus how the proposed resolution or decision may demonstrate virtues such as, care, concern, and compassion.*



Application of Ethical Theory Assignment by Deborah Holt, BS, MA and Paul Knoepfler TEDxVienna The Ethical Dilemma of Designer Babies  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/paul\\_knoepfler\\_the\\_ethical\\_dilemma\\_of\\_designer\\_babies](https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_knoepfler_the_ethical_dilemma_of_designer_babies) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.



## **PART VIII**

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# **GLOSSARY & SUGGESTED DISCUSSION FORUM QUESTIONS**





## CHAPTER 48

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# *Glossary*

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## GLOSSARY

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**Absolutist:** A normative moral theory is absolutist, rather than relativistic, when it suggests that an action is wrong (or right) in all circumstances, without exception. For example, murder might be thought to be absolutely wrong, irrespective of any circumstances.

**Act-centered:** A normative moral theory that associates moral rightness/wrongness with actions (e.g. Utilitarianism).

**Active euthanasia:** If a person is actively euthanized it means that their death was caused by external intervention rather than natural causes, most likely through a lethal injection or the voluntary swallowing of a deadly cocktail of drugs.

**Act Utilitarianism:** See Consequentialism.

**Agápē:** Greek word meaning “love”. Refers to the love of God for humans and humans for God. The “highest” form of love. Agápē, as discussed by Fletcher, is an attitude and not a feeling, one which

does not expect anything in return and does not give any special considerations to anyone.

**Agápē calculus:** Introduced by Fletcher. The claim that we ought to always act so as to bring about the most love for the most people.

**Agent-centered:** A normative moral theory that associates moral rightness/wrongness with people (e.g. Virtue Ethics).

**Agent-Neutrality:** The view that moral decisions should be made without special weighting being given to personal feelings.

**Anal stage:** The second stage of Freud's Psycho-sexual Development Theory roughly from one and a half to three years old. Pleasure is gained through controlling going to the toilet. This stage is about gaining control of one's body, and it starts with controlling the bladder and bowels (being potty trained).

**Antinomianism:** The term introduced by Fletcher which says that morally an agent can do whatever he or she wants in a situation.

**Anti-Realism:** Simply the denial of Realism. Anti-realists deny the existence of any mind-independent, objective, moral properties.

**Apparent good:** Introduced by Aquinas when discussing his Natural Law Theory. An apparent good is when a secondary precept is out of line with the Natural Law so we are not morally required to follow it.

**A priori:** Knowledge gained through reason alone, without needing to test/experience the world.

**A posteriori:** Knowledge gained as a result of experience of the world.

**Attitudinal Hedonism:** The theory of well-being which holds that what makes a life go well is entirely determined by the amount of pleasure a person experiences where pleasure is understood as an attitudinal state (i.e. taking pleasure in something) rather than a sensation. Fred Feldman is a defender of this view.

**Belief:** A psychological state. If you believe something, then you take that something to be true.

**Biting-the-bullet:** The argumentative strategy of simply accepting

an apparently awkward conclusion as a non-fatal implication of a theory.

“Boo/hurrah” theory: See Emotivism.

Categorical Imperative: Kant’s supreme principle of morality. Using this we can work out how we ought to behave. It is a command (imperative) which should be followed irrespective of the consequences (categorical).

Categorical Imperative 1: Universalization: “...act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”.<sup>1</sup>

Categorical Imperative 2: Means and ends: “So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”.<sup>2</sup>

Categorical Imperative 3: Kingdom of ends: “...every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a lawmaking member in the universal kingdom of ends”.<sup>3</sup>

Cognitivism, Psychological: Not to be confused with Realism. It suggests that when we make moral claims of the form “murder is wrong” or “helping others is right” we are giving voice to our beliefs, rather than our non-belief states such as emotions.

Cognitivism, Semantic: Not to be confused with Realism. It suggests that when we make moral claims of the form “murder is wrong” or “helping others is right” our claims can be true or false (what philosophers call truth-apt).

Conscience (Aquinas): For Aquinas conscience is morally neutral, it simply “bears witness”, and it is a “sign-post” to what is right and wrong. It is not a source of moral knowledge. This means that for Aquinas conscience is fallible. He calls it the “application of knowledge to activity”.

Conscience (Freud): For Freud the conscience is the form that the super-ego takes in addressing the ego. This understanding of “conscience” can be thought of as synonymous with the “guilty conscience”.

Consequentialism: A normative moral theory that states that the

moral value of an action is determined wholly by the consequences of that action (e.g. Act Utilitarianism).

Cultural

Relativism:

Is the principle that an individual's beliefs and activities should be understood by others in terms of that individual's own culture.\*

Demandingness objection: A challenge to Utilitarianism. If it is not the case that pleasure needs to be merely promoted but actually maximized at all opportunities, then an extremely high bar is set.

Deontological: A normative moral theory that focuses on duty rather than outcomes.

Direct Duties: Used in discussion of Kantian ethics. Direct Duties are those duties arrived at via a formulation of the Categorical Imperative.

Dispositions: In respect of Virtue Ethics, dispositions are tendencies in our psychology. For example, I may have the disposition to be angry if someone steals from me, or the disposition to be forgiving if someone steals from me.

Divine Command Theory: The metaethical view that what is right/wrong is what is commanded/forbidden by God.

Divine Law: Introduced by Aquinas as part of his Natural Law Theory. The Divine Law is discovered through revelation. Divine laws are those that God has, in His grace, seen fit to give us and are those "mysteries", those rules given by God which we find in scripture; for example, the ten commandments.

Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE): Introduced by Aquinas in Summa Theologica. If an act fulfills four conditions then it is morally acceptable. If not, then it is not. The first is that the act must be a good one; the second is that the act must come about before the consequences; the third is that the intention must be good; the fourth, it must be for serious reasons.

Ego: One of the three parts of the mind according to Freud. The "ego" polices the id to allow a person's social interaction in the world.

**Electra omplex:** In Jungian psychoanalysis, the name given to the unconscious desire experienced by girls to have a sexual relationship with their fathers, and consequently being in competition with their mothers.

**Emotivism:** A metaethical theory. A form of Psychological Non-Cognitivism that holds that moral judgments are expressions of the speaker's emotions rather than a description of anything. This is not to be confused with subjectivism or relativism (sometimes referred to as the "boo/hurrah" theory).

**Empirical:** A method for gaining knowledge that requires sense-experience and interaction with the world as studied by science.

**Epistemology:** The philosophical study of knowledge. Questions might include, "What is knowledge?"; "Can we know something a priori"? "What can we know?"

**Eternal Law:** Introduced by Aquinas when discussing his Natural Law Theory. God's rational purpose and plan for all things. The Eternal Law is part of God's mind it has always, and will always, exist. The Eternal Law is not simply something that God decided at some point to write.

**Eudaimonia:** The Aristotelian idea of "the good life"; best translated as "flourishing".

**Euthanasia:** The act of seeking to provide a good death for a person who otherwise might be faced with a much more unpleasant death (see also [voluntary/non-voluntary](#) and [passive/active euthanasia](#)).

**Euthyphro dilemma:** A challenge to Divine Command Theory (DCT). Introduced by Plato in his dialogue Euthyphro, it suggests there are two questions you can ask about DCT, but each answer that can be given is problematic. The questions: (i) is something good because God commands it. Or (ii) does God command it because it is Good.

**Felicific Calculus:** See Hedonic Calculus.

**Guilt:** Freud uses this term to refer to the feeling that arises when

our conscience requires certain things from us which we fail to achieve.

Golden Mean: In Virtue Ethics, the morally virtuous middle way between the vices of excess and deficiency.

Good will: The Kantian idea of our specific will which is good through its willing alone rather than what it effects or accomplishes.

Harm principle: John Stuart Mill's principle that: "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant".<sup>4</sup>

Hedonic Calculus: Jeremy Bentham's way of calculating the pleasure/pain associated with a possible future action.

Hedonism: A theory of well-being which holds that improves a person's life is entirely determined by the amount of pleasure that person experiences; no other factors are relevant at all.

Higher and lower pleasures: Distinction made by Mill between the quality of pleasure. Higher pleasures are those pleasures of the intellect brought about via activities like poetry, reading or attending the theater. Lower pleasures are animalistic and base; pleasures associated with drinking beer, having sex or lazing on a sun-lounger.

Humean Theory of Motivation: The view that motivation only arises when a belief combines with an appropriately related desire — where desire takes the lead role. Further it is the view that beliefs and desires are distinct mental states such that a belief cannot entail a desire.

Hume's fork: Hume divided knowledge into two camps — knowledge gained from relations of ideas and knowledge gained from matters of fact.

Hypothetical Imperative: A command that applies to someone only because of the desires/wants of the agent, e.g. you ought to go for a run if you want to get fit.

**Id:** One of the three parts of the mind according to Freud. Id is the collection of our primal drives, e.g. the basic desires for food, sex, drink and is the oldest part of the mind. The id cannot be properly formalized or understood and Freud likens it to chaos.

**Indirect Duties:** Discussed in relation to Kantian ethics. A duty we owe to X (for example, animals, the environment) is in fact a duty we owe to humans. E.g. we have an indirect duty towards animals because if we treat animals badly then we will not uphold our duties towards humans.

**Intrinsic:** Something is intrinsically good if it is essentially or necessarily good, just in and of itself; it does not rely on anything else for it to be good.

**Intuitionism:** A view in moral Epistemology that holds that there is at least one moral belief, and possibly many, that are self-evidently justifiable. This does not rule out other ways of justifying moral claims, nor does it mean that intuitionists believe judges to be infallible.

**Invincible ignorance:** From Aquinas. Ignorance that cannot be overcome through the use of reason. Doing something wrong when they could not have known better.

**"Is/ought" gap:** The supposed problem of deriving an "ought" (prescriptive) claim from a (descriptive) claim.

**Latency stage:** The fourth stage in Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development, roughly from six to the onset of puberty. At this stage sexual desire is repressed. There are no new sexual desires formed. Girls plays with girls in order to learn the role of a girl and boys play with boys in order to learn about the role of boys.

**Legalism:** Term used by Fletcher to refer to a system of ethics such that someone in that system "blindly" observes moral rules without being sensitive to the situation.

**Maxim:** A general principle or rule upon which we act.

**Mature genital stage:** Fifth and final stage of Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development.

**Moral Error Theory:** Combination of Semantic Non-Cognitivism, Anti-Realism and the Truth-maker Theory of Truth. The conclusion is that all moral claims that we make are systematically and uniformly false.

**Natural Law:** Introduced by Aquinas when discussing his Natural Law Theory. When humans act in accordance with their purpose/function of reason then they act according to the Natural Law (see primary precepts and secondary precepts).

**Naturalism, Realism:** The view that moral properties exist and are as natural as those properties discussed and examined in the sciences.

**Naturalistic Fallacy:** According to G. E. Moore, the idea that moral properties can be reduced to natural properties. Moore believes that one commits the naturalistic fallacy by claiming that goodness = pleasure/happiness/preference satisfaction.

**Nihilism:** Associated with theories that try to eliminate values. For example, Moral Error Theory can be labelled nihilistic because it denies the existence of any moral values in the world.

**Non-belief state:** A psychological state that is not related to taking something to be true. It is typically thought to be a non-descriptive or non-representational state. For example, an emotional state such as joy, or anger.

**Non-Cognitivism, Psychological:** When we make moral claims of the form “murder is wrong” or “helping others is right” we are not giving voice to our beliefs, we are rather expressing our non-belief states such as emotions.

**Non-Cognitivism, Semantic:** When we make moral claims of the form “murder is wrong” or “helping others is right” our claims are neither true nor false. They are not truth-apt.

**Non-Naturalism:** The view that if moral properties exist they could not show up on the scientific picture of what exists.

**Non-voluntary euthanasia:** Non-voluntary euthanasia occurs when a decision regarding premature and merciful death is made



for one person by another person, because the person to be euthanized is unable to make a decision for themselves.

**Normative:** A normative moral theory is a theory designed to provide guidance for how to behave/live.

**Neurosis:** Term used by Freud to refer to when the super-ego fails to deal correctly with the id. In particular, when the pleasure principle is repressed.

**Objectivism:**

One of several doctrines holding that all reality is objective and external to the mind and that knowledge is reliably based on observed objects and events. Also see the following link which offers a definition related to Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism [https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Objectivism+\(Ayn+Rand\)\\*](https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Objectivism+(Ayn+Rand)*)

**Objective List Theory:** A theory of well-being which holds that what makes a life go well is determined by a list of items (e.g. loving relationships, meaningful knowledge, autonomy).

**Oedipus complex:** In psychoanalysis, the name given to the unconscious desire of a child to have a sexual relationship with a parent of the opposite sex; most likely this is expressed as a boy's sexual attraction to his mother.

**Open Question Argument:** Put forward by G. E. Moore. It attacks naturalist realist positions in Metaethics. It holds that if moral properties (e.g. goodness) are natural properties (e.g. pleasure) then moral terms (e.g. "goodness") must be synonymous with natural terms (e.g. "pleasure"). However, it is always an open question — the answer is not obvious to us — to ask whether a moral term means the same as a natural term. This means that moral terms are not synonymous with natural terms. This means that moral properties cannot be identical with natural properties.

**Oral stage:** First stage in Freud's Theory of Psychosexual Development, from birth to about one and a half. This stage is where babies get pleasure through putting things in their mouth, pleasure in biting, chewing and sucking.

Palliative care: “If you have an illness that can’t be cured, palliative care makes you as comfortable as possible, by managing your pain and other distressing symptoms. It also involves psychological, social and spiritual support for you and your family or carers. This is called a holistic approach, because it deals with you as a “whole” person”.<sup>5</sup>

Paradox of Tragedy: Also known as the paradox of negative emotions. Not a genuine paradox. The oddity that in real life negative emotions are not desired whereas in other contexts, such as horror films, roller-coasters, dramas they are desired.

Passive euthanasia: Passive euthanasia occurs when a person is allowed to die due to the deliberate withdrawal of treatment that might keep them alive.

Persistent Vegetative State (PVS): A state of being in which a person is biologically alive, but shows no sign of psychological interaction with the world. The state is labelled persistent when it is unlikely this condition will alter through any treatment.

Phallic stage: Freud’s third stage in his Theory of Psychosexual Development; roughly from three to six years. It is about discovering one’s genitals, and importantly that they are different in men and women. This stage is where Freud thinks we develop the Oedipus, and the Electra complex. A problem moving through this stage will cause problems with intimacy in later life.

Phronesis: From Aristotelian ethics referring to “practical wisdom”. Arguably the most important virtuous disposition or character trait.

Pleasure Principle: Idea put forward by Freud. This is the claim that what identifies and unifies the drives of the id is the avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure.

Preference Utilitarianism: A non-hedonistic version of Utilitarianism. The greatest good for the greatest number cannot be reduced to pleasure in either raw or higher forms. Instead, what makes a life go better for a person is entirely determined by the satisfaction of their preferences (e.g. defended by Peter Singer).

**Prescriptivism:** A metaethical theory claiming that our moral utterances express more than just emotional approval and disapproval. Instead, our moral utterances express a subjective prescription for others to act in accordance with our moral judgments (e.g. Hare).

**Prima Facie:** "On first impression/look" or "At first glance/appearance".

**Primary Precepts:** Introduced as part of Aquinas's Natural Law Theory. They are overarching general rules. They are absolute and binding on all rational agents. His examples are: protect and preserve human life; reproduce and educate one's offspring; know and worship God; live in a society.

**Principle of Charity:** An argumentative strategy of granting one's opponent to be rational and giving the strongest interpretation of their argument.

**Principle of Utility:** The principle that an action is moral if and only if it leads to the greatest good for the greatest number. Associated with Utilitarianism.

**Problem of Parity:** A challenge to Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism does not allow you to give extra moral weight to the life of a loved one (see Agent-Neutrality).

**Queer:** The idea of J. L. Mackie, associated with Moral Error Theory. Something is queer if it is utterly unlike any other existing property/entity.

**Ratio:** Aquinas's term for the reason that helps discover the Natural Laws.

**Realism:** The view that moral properties exist independently of human beings and can be located in the world.

**Relativism:**  
The theory that value judgments, as of truth, beauty, or morality, have no universal validity but are valid only for the persons or groups holding them.\*

**Relativistic:** A normative moral theory is relativistic, rather than absolutist, when it allows that an action can be moral in one

situation but immoral in another situation. For example, the morality of stealing might be thought to be relative to the situation in which stealing takes place.

**Real Good:** Introduced by Aquinas when discussing his Natural Law Theory. A real good is when a secondary precept is accordance with the Natural Law and consequently we are morally required to follow it.

**Rule-Utilitarianism:** The view that should create a set of rules that, if followed, would produce the greatest amount of total happiness (e.g. defended by John Stuart Mill). See also, Strong and Weak Rule Utilitarianism.

**Sanctity of Life:** The idea that life holds absolute value, very likely justified by the idea that life is God-given.

**Secondary Precepts:** Introduced by Aquinas when discussing the Natural Law Theory. Secondary precepts are not generated by our reason but rather they are imposed by governments, groups, clubs, societies etc. Examples, might include: do not drive above 70 mph on a motorway; do not kidnap people; always wear a helmet when riding a bike; do not hack into someone's bank account.

**Semantic:** Semantic concerns are concerns about words and their meanings; it relates to a focus on language and meaning.

**Speciesism:** Term introduced by Peter Singer. The claim that treating non-human animals differently from humans based purely on the arbitrary fact that they are from one species rather than another is morally wrong. Singer takes it to be morally equivalent to treating another person differently based on a difference in gender (sexism) or in race (racism).

**Straw-man:** A straw-man argument is an argument phrased deliberately in its weakest form, so that it is easy to defeat. Straw-men arguments allow a person to avoid arguing with a difficult objection on "level ground".

**Strong Rule Utilitarianism:** Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness must always be followed.

**Subjectivism:**

ethical subjectivism holds that individual conscience is the only appropriate standard for moral judgment.\*

**Super-ego:** One of the three parts of the mind according to Freud. The super-ego is the voice of authority issuing prohibitions, inhibitions and moral constraints.

**Synderesis:** Term introduced by Aquinas. Synderesis is not the same as conscience but is the innate ability of the mind (a habit of the mind) to apprehend the eternal/Divine laws.

**Teleological:** A teleological normative theory is one concerned with consequences (e.g. Utilitarianism).

**Teleologist:** Someone who holds that every object has a final cause/goal/end/purpose.

**Telos:** For Aristotle, telos is the purpose of something.

**Theory of Psychosexual Development:** Developed by Freud. A theory of sexual development from birth to death: includes the oral, anal, phallic, latency and mature genital stage.

**Thought-experiment:** A hypothetical situation — often fantastical — used to highlight and challenge the intuitions we have on various topics. E.g. Judith Thomson's "the transplant surgeon"

**Truth-apt:** If a claim is truth-apt then it is capable of being true or false. N.B. the claim may never be true but it could still be capable of being true or false. This above explanation of the meaning of the phrase "truth-apt" is itself truth-apt, for example.

**Truth-maker Theory of Truth:** A claim is true if and only if some feature of the world, such as properties, makes it true.

**Tyranny of the Majority:** A challenge to Utilitarianism. It seems that Utilitarianism is open to cases where the majority are morally required to exploit the minority for the greater good of maximising total pleasure.

**Utility:** A term used by utilitarians to refer to the pleasure/pain/preference satisfaction associated with a particular action.

**Utilitarianism:** See Consequentialism.

**Verification principle:** The principle that states that if a sentence

is not analytic or potentially empirically verifiable then it is meaningless.

V-rules: Introduced by Rosalind Hursthouse. She suggests that Virtue Ethics provides guidance in the form of “v-rules”. These are guiding rules of the form “do what is honest” or “avoid what is envious”.

Vincible ignorance: From Aquinas. Ignorance that can be overcome through the use of reason. Doing something wrong when one ought to have known better.

Virtue: A morally correct character disposition or trait, as opposed to a character disposition or trait that represents a moral vice.

Voluntary euthanasia: Voluntary euthanasia occurs when a person chooses someone to terminate their life in order to avoid future suffering.

Weak Rule Utilitarianism: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness can be ignored in circumstances where more happiness would be produced by breaking the rule.

Well-being: The measure of how well a life is going, for the person whose life it is.

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1 . Kant, Moral Law, p. 15.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

4 . S. Mill, On Liberty, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlLbty1.html>

5 NHS definition, <http://www.nhs.uk/Planners/end-of-life-care/Pages/what-it-involves-and-when-it-starts.aspx>

*\*Changes to original text include these words & definitions.*



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## CHAPTER 49

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# *Suggested Course Discussion Forum Questions on Ethical Theories, Concepts & Applied Ethics Scenarios*

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## **SUGGESTED COURSE DISCUSSION FORUM QUESTIONS ON ETHICAL THEORIES, CONCEPTS & APPLIED ETHICS SCENARIOS**

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### **PHILOSOPHY, ETHICS AND THINKING**

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1. How would you explain what philosophy is to someone?
2. Do you think philosophy is important? If yes, why? If no, why?



3. List some ethical questions.
4. Can you figure out if your questions are Normative, Applied, or Metaethical?
5. Is there a link between Applied, Normative and Metaethics? Which type of ethics do you think it would be best to study first, and which last?
6. What is the difference between prudential and moral reasons?
7. What is meant by the “is/ought” gap? Why is it important to remember when discussing ethical questions?
8. What role, if any, does science have in ethical arguments?
9. What are thought experiments? Why might they be useful to philosophers?
10. “Because there are so many different views on moral issues there cannot be any moral truth”. What do you think of this line of argument?

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## UTILITARIANISM

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1. Is there anything that would improve your life that cannot be reduced to either pleasure or preference satisfaction?
2. Would you enter Nozick’s experience machine if you knew you would not come out? Would you put someone you care about into the machine while they were asleep, so that they never had to make the decision?
3. Can pleasure be measured? Does Bentham go about this task correctly?

4. Which is the most serious problem facing Bentham's Act Utilitarianism? Can it be overcome?
  5. Does Mill successfully improve Bentham's Act Utilitarianism in any way?
  6. Are you ever told to stop watching television and do something else? Is this good for you? Why?
  7. Do you have convictions or beliefs you would not want to sacrifice for the greater good, should you ever be forced to?
  8. Why do utilitarians not give up on the idea of maximising pleasure and just talk in terms of promoting sufficient pleasure? Would this solve or raise problems?
  9. Is Weak Rule Utilitarianism merely Act Utilitarianism by another name?
  10. Does Strong Rule Utilitarianism deserve to be labelled as a utilitarian theory?
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## DEONTOLOGY – KANTIAN ETHICS

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1. Think about your life. Do you think there are things you "ought to do"?
2. Do you think that there are things you ought to do irrespective of your desires and inclinations?
3. What are Categorical and Hypothetical Imperatives? Do you think that rules of etiquette are categorical or hypothetical?
4. How might Kant respond to the SS officer example?

5. Can you think of some examples where you might be treating someone solely as means-to-an-end?
  6. Why might Kant's theory be well placed to respect people's rights?
  7. Do you think we have any moral obligations towards animals? What would Kant say?
  8. What role do you think intuitions should have in assessing moral theories?
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## ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS

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1. Who has the better life — the happy hedonist or the virtuous individual?
2. Are the virtues fixed and absolute? Or can virtues be relative to culture and time?
3. Is becoming moral a skill? Is morality based on "knowing that" or "knowing how"?
4. Can Virtue Ethics offer useful guidance?
5. Is the Golden Mean a useful way of working out virtuous characteristics?
6. Are some virtues more important than others? Why?
7. Can you think of a virtue that does not contribute to eudaimonia?
8. Can you think of something that contributes to eudaimonia that is not a virtue?
9. If there is no purpose to life, is there any point in

subscribing to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?

10. What should you do if virtues seem to clash when faced with different possible actions?
11. Who might count as virtuous role models and why?
12. Do human beings have a telos or proper function?

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## FLETCHER'S SITUATION ETHICS

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1. Why do you think Fletcher's book was so popular at the time of publication?
2. If an alien visited earth and asked "What is love?" how would you answer them?
3. How does Situationism differ from "Utilitarianism" if at all?
4. If we act from love, does that mean we can do anything?
5. What does it mean to say that conscience is a verb rather than a noun? Do you think we have a conscience? If you do, should we think of it as a verb or a noun?
6. Why does Fletcher say that his theory is: "fact-based, empirical-based, data-conscious and inquiring"?
7. What do you think a Christian would make of Fletcher's theory?
8. What do you think "situation" means?
9. What does Fletcher mean by "positivism"?

## AQUINAS'S NATURAL LAW THEORY

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1. If God exists then what — if anything — do you think that has to do with what is right and wrong?
2. We might answer the “arbitrariness” dilemma by citing God’s nature. Why might this answer be problematic?
3. What is the Eternal Law?
4. What are Natural Laws and primary precepts?
5. What are Human Laws and secondary precepts?
6. What are Divine Laws?
7. Just as a good eye is to see, and a good acorn is to grow then a good human is to...? Is to what? How are we going to finish this sentence?
8. People often talk about what is “natural”? What do you think they mean by this? How useful is the notion of “natural” in a moral theory?
9. Think of a descriptive claim. Think of a prescriptive claim. Why might it be problematic moving from one to the other?
10. If people thought long enough, do you think there would be convergence on what is morally right and wrong?
11. What is the Doctrine of Double Effect?
12. What is the difference — if anything — between intending to bring about some end and acting where you know your action will bring about that end?

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## METAETHICAL THEORIES

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1. Does Emotivism lend support to Relativism?
2. Does Naturalism lend support to Absolutism?
3. Does moral disagreement lend support to Anti-Realism?
4. Can a philosopher ever know what you mean better than you know?
5. Is Metaethics as important as normative or applied ethics?
6. Are moral judgments meaningless if they are about non-natural properties? If they are non-cognitive?
7. Do we just know what is right or wrong based on common sense? Does this support Intuitionism?
8. Is there such a thing as moral progress? What does this suggest in terms of Metaethics?
9. Can a non-cognitivist properly explain moral disagreement?

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## CONSCIENCE

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1. Do you think you have a conscience? What does it tell you?
2. What is the difference between synderesis and conscience?

3. Do you think that everyone ultimately knows — if they reason correctly — what is right and wrong?
4. What is the difference between vincible and invincible? Is not most of the supposedly invincible knowledge, really vincible? We just need to try harder?
5. What are the possible different roles for the conscience?
6. Could the conscience be a morally bad thing?
7. Why does Freud think we need to be cautious about listening to our conscience?
8. How does Freud's account of conscience relate to his Psychosexual Development Theory?
9. What do you think about Freud's Psychosexual Development Theory?
10. Draw up a table of the key stages and accompanying characteristics of Freud's Psychosexual Development Theory.
11. Could it ever make sense to talk about animals/robots having a conscience? If not, why not?
12. Do you think conscience will still shape our lives in one thousand years?

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## STEALING

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1. Is keeping due tax from the government an example of stealing?
2. Can you create your own satisfactory definition of

stealing?

3. Does stealing once make you more likely to steal again?
4. Is it possible to measure the psychological pains associated with stealing?
5. Is an absolute prohibition against stealing defensible? Why or why not?
6. Do people you consider virtuous have any history of stealing?
7. Would the best set of rules for promoting the greatest good for the greatest number contain a rule absolutely prohibiting stealing?
8. Is it worth debating the ethics of stealing if you are an emotivist or a prescriptivist?
9. What would the error-theorist say about the morality of stealing?

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## TELLING LIES

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1. Do you ever think it is morally acceptable to lie? When?
2. Could a robot lie?
3. In the local town there is a sign at the roundabout — “Happy birthday Keith, 40 today!” It has been there about a year. Is this lying?
4. Do you think it makes sense to talk about “lying to oneself”? If it does, how might this change our definition?



5. Reflecting on your answers so far would you agree with our definition of “lying”? Or do you think it needs modifying?
6. Give an example where the consequentialist would say we are morally required to lie.
7. How might the rule and the act utilitarian differ in their response to the question whether it is morally wrong to lie?
8. Give an example where the deontologist would say we ought not to lie.
9. If you had to go for either a deontological approach to lying or a consequentialist approach, which would it be?
10. Do you think that we are living in a “post-truth” era? If so, how does this change (if at all) how we think of lying?

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## EUTHANASIA

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1. What makes a life worth living? Is a life ever without value?
2. Should the Doctrine of Double Effect be ethically relevant? Is there a moral difference between allowing and doing?
3. What is assisted suicide? Is it different from Euthanasia?
4. If euthanasia is morally acceptable, should passive euthanasia ever be viewed as an acceptable method?
5. Can the slippery slope objection be blocked in this context? Answer with reference to the development of euthanasia laws in Belgium.

6. Is Rule Utilitarianism the only teleological theory that survives the slippery slope objection?
7. Is there something morally uncomfortable about the argument from resource allocation? If so, what?
8. If you were designing euthanasia laws, what would they look like?
9. Should a Sanctity of Life ethic have any role in twenty-first century medicine?
10. Is the morality of euthanasia determined by empirical factors such as levels of palliative care available?
11. Should a depressed patient ever be allowed euthanasia? Is personal autonomy something we must always respect? If not, when should it not be respected?
12. Could involuntary euthanasia (euthanasia against a person's wishes) ever be justified in any circumstance?

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## **SIMULATED KILLING**

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1. What is "simulated killing"?
2. How might you consider (a) the simulated killing of animals? Should it be treated any differently from the simulated killing of humans? (b) young children playing games that involve killing, e.g. a playground game of soldiers.
3. Should we treat "simulated killing" differently from other

“simulated” actions, such as stealing or rape?

4. Imagine a case in the future where one can buy ultra-life like AI robots. These robots can be “killed”. They will “bleed”, they have been programmed to beg for mercy, to whimper, etc. Once they have been “killed” they can be reset and “killed again”. Should we treat this case differently? What happens if the robots are so lifelike that people no longer know the difference between them and real humans? Does that change things?
5. Governments have censored video games, such as Call of Duty, and Hatred. Are they right to do so? That is, even if we find them immoral, how might this relate to laws governing “simulated killing”?
6. What is the “Paradox of Tragedy”? Do you think it has any relevance when discussing the morality of simulated killing?
7. Use Google Scholar to find the most up-to-date research on the psychological effects of “simulated killing” (any version you want). What does the current psychological research tell us about the ethical issues raised in this chapter?

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## BUSINESS ETHICS

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1. Do you think that a university is a business?
2. What do you think the difference is between a business and a company?
3. Find some examples of a business’s ethics and/or values

statement. What are they saying? What do you think of them?

4. Write an ethics/value statement for your school.
5. What do you think of the argument that it is irrational for a business to be ethical?
6. Find a few examples of adverts. Explain in your own words what they are telling the customer. Is this intentional deception? Is it lying?
7. Imagine that as an employee you are offered a bribe. How would the utilitarian tell us to act? What about the Kantian? Is it always wrong to take bribes in business?
8. Some workplace rules seem true in every culture — e.g. do not use violence. Others, perhaps concerning dress code, do not. How then are we going to decide between those values that should be part of ethical business practice and those that are merely idiosyncratic features of Western business practice?
9. Why should business care about the world they leave for future generations? After all, future generations do not exist.
10. How far do you think capitalism is immoral?
11. If you do think that capitalism is immoral then what alternative is there? Why is the proposed alternative more morally acceptable?

## EATING ANIMALS

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1. Moral statements regarding the acceptability of eating animals are often emotional. Does this mean the emotivist explanation is the best explanation?
2. Do all animals deserve equal consideration of interests? Do only some animals? Which ones?
3. Should we expect clear moral answers when it comes to the acceptability of eating animals?
4. Does moral disagreement in this applied ethical area lend support to Anti-Realism?
5. How much of this moral issue turns on empirical data regarding the treatment of animals before slaughter?
6. Should you apply your favored normative moral theory in order to find the correct conclusion in this ethical area, or should you check your favoured normative moral theory to see if it gets it right in this ethical area?



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