

## Introduction to Ethics



# Introduction to Ethics

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# Ethics Course Info

## ETHICS

By: Manuela A. Gomez

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PART I

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION TO  
ETHICS



# I. Integrating Ethics



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from this version of the text. You can view it online*

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We are constantly faced with making choices. Some of these will be trivial such as what outfit to wear today, some will be much more serious issues, even involving life and death. We offer that all decisions we make are fundamental to our character, and that they will shape the kind of people we become. This is why decisions have to be made carefully, and with ethics in mind.

While there are not usually simple answers to our questions and decision-making, this does not mean there is NO answer, or that ethics is of no value. In these cases, ethics takes more time, more reflection, more critical thinking, and more discussion with others, especially with people you admire.

Sometimes in spite of all our efforts to clarify an issue in which laws, policies or guidelines are unclear, we may still not know what to make of a situation. In this case, and if an urgent decision has to be made, we can encourage our students to do their best. As long as we do that, all we can be charged with is a mistake or an error of judgment. Ethics cannot make us infallible, but it can sensitize us to how commonly we are confronted by ethical issues, so we recognize them more readily, and think about them more honestly. In the long run we will become better people as a result.

Many times ethics and ethical decision-making seem out of the scope of a person's day-to-day life, but the reality is that seemingly

insignificant decisions can have larger ethical implications. Take, for example, what we choose to eat. This “simple” decision can have complex ethical consequences, such as to environmental and economic sustainability, as well as impact to our health.

## 2. What is Ethics?



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Ethics, as a field of study, is sort of like a tree with 10,000 branches—branches that all disagree with each other. With such variances, the, how do we begin to understand ethics?

One way to really think about ethics is through its historical meaning, which has to do with a person's ethos. This is the idea that ethics is connected with character, and it is sort of a high standard approach to what it means to act in a particularly cogent and courageous way, as well as to demonstrate personal integrity. And then there is a more important conceptual distinction a person could make, particularly between ethics and morals. This is needed because when defining ethics, many will use the word “morals” interchangeably, which confuses the issue.

There is, however, some disagreement among scholars as to the difference between morals and ethics. One school of thought asserts that morality is inherently founded on spiritual principles—one's responsibility to a supernatural being or goal. Ethics, on the other hand, relies on materialist and social consequences, not spiritual ones, in order to determine what is ethical or not. Other schools of thought argue that this line between morals and ethics is arbitrary. Instead, they believe ethics is simply a formal branch of philosophy that concerns itself with the study of morals and their justification; this group would assert that ethics is the philosophy of morals.

We posit that ethics is not the same thing as morality. Consider, for example, how arbitrary moral stances tend to be, especially when they are outside of one's own culture or religious beliefs. What may seem justifiable in one culture can easily be problematic in another. In addition, being ethical is not simply following a law or rules that have been established. In fact, some of our most revered historical/modern figures not only disagreed with laws or rules they deemed to be unethical, but also fought against them—and in some cases, it cost them their lives.

Ethics, rather, emphasizes the responsibility and capability of the individual to come to his/her own conclusions through reasoning, and to determine which principles are relevant in a particular case. They are well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethics is the reasonable obligation for us to refrain from hurting others, and sometimes an obligation to help others.

Living ethically also requires the continuous effort of studying our own beliefs and conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and evidence-based. It is knowing that before one can do the right thing, one has to figure out what the right thing is.

These are some questions to consider:

“What kind of person is good?”

“What kind of person should I be?”

“How should a good person behave in this situation?”

Our goal is to build capacity for ethical reasoning—so they not only know what ought to be done, but also understand *why*.



# 3. Ethics Explored

## 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 among 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, and what makes Core 202 such an interesting class.

## 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.

## Do “ethical” and “moral” mean the same thing?

For the purposes of this Handbook, 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 are 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

## What are some 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?

## **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."

## **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.

## 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.

## 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 Radford” 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.

## What are 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.

## What is an ethical dilemma?

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. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre gives the example of a young Frenchman of military age during the wartime Nazi occupation who finds himself faced, through no fault of his own, with the choice of staying home and caring for his ailing

mother or going off to join the resistance to fight for his country's future:

He fully realized that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance – or perhaps his death – would plunge her into despair.... Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous – and it might be frustrated on the way. ([Sartre, 1977](#))

## 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?

Rarely are we called on to fight zombies or Nazis, but that doesn't mean we live in an ethically easy world. 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.

## 4. Types of Ethics

MANUELA A. GOMEZ



### DIFFERENT TYPES OF ETHICS

We need to identify that there are different types of ethics and you may have been already exposed to them.

PERSONAL

COMMON

PROFESSIONAL

*Exercise*

Can you guess what the differences are?

## Personal Ethics

- Includes your personal values and moral qualities.
- Influenced by family, friends, culture, religion, education and many other factors.
- Examples: I believe racism is morally wrong. I am in favor of abortion.
- Personal ethics can change and are chosen by an individual.

## Common Ethics

- Ethics that the majority of people agree on.
- Many philosophers argue there is no such ethics.
- Do we have the same ethics in the world? Do we have the same ethics in the U.S.? Does everyone in your family share the same ethics?
- Examples: Murdering people for the sake of murder is wrong.
- Notice how this would change in the context of self-defense.
- Common ethics have to be very general to avoid disagreement.

## Professional Ethics

- Rules imposed on an employee in a company, or as member of a profession. For instance, journalists, doctors, lawyers, etc.
- Imposed when you are a part of a professional setting or when you are being trained or educated for working for a specific profession.
- Examples: no gossiping, time management, punctuality, confidentiality, transparency.
- Not adhering to these may harm your professional reputation.

### *Exercise*

Come up with 3 different examples of beliefs that pertain to your personal ethics.

- For instance: It is wrong to eat animals and animal products.



## *remember*

These are different types of ethics and they can sometimes overlap or come into conflict with each other.

- Can you come up with an example of personal ethics conflicting with professional ethics?
- What about vice versa?

## 5. Professional Ethics



Business or Professional ethics in a nutshell:

Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the meaning of all aspects of human behavior. Theoretical Ethics, sometimes called Normative Ethics, is about discovering and delineating right from wrong; it is the consideration of how we develop the rules and principles (norms) by which to judge and guide meaningful decision-making. Theoretical Ethics is supremely intellectual in character, and, being a branch of philosophy, is also rational in nature. Theoretical Ethics is the rational reflection on what is right, what is wrong, what is just, what is unjust, what is good and what is bad in terms of human behavior.

Business ethics is not chiefly theoretical in character. Though reflective and rational in part, this is only a prelude to the essential task behind business ethics. It is best understood as a branch of ethics called applied ethics: the discipline of applying value to human behavior, relationships and constructs, and the resulting meaning. Business ethics is simply the practice of this discipline within the context of the enterprise of creating wealth (the fundamental role of business).

There are three parts to the discipline of business ethics:

personal, professional and corporate. All three are intricately related, and it is helpful to distinguish between them because each rests on slightly different assumptions and requires a slightly different focus in order to be understood. We are looking at business ethics through a trifocal lens: close up and personal, intermediate and professional, and on the grand scale (utilizing both farsighted and peripheral vision) of the corporation.

In spite of some recent bad press, business executives are first and foremost human beings. Like all persons, they seek meaning for their lives through relationships and enterprise, and they want their lives to amount to something. Since ethics is chiefly the discipline of meaning, the business executive, like all other human beings, is engaged in this discipline all the time, whether cognizant of it or not. Therefore, we should begin by looking at how humans have historically approached the process of making meaningful decisions. Here are four ethical approaches that have stood the test of time.

## Personal ethics: four ethical approaches

From the earliest moments of recorded human consciousness, the ethical discipline has entailed four fundamental approaches, often called ethical decision-making frameworks: Utilitarian Ethics (outcome based), Deontological Ethics (duty based), Virtue Ethics (virtue based), and Communitarian Ethics (community based). Each has a distinctive point of departure as well as distinctive ways of doing the fundamental ethical task of raising and answering questions of value. It is also important to understand that all four approaches have overlaps as well as common elements, such as:

- **Impartiality:** weighting interests equally
- **Rationality:** backed by reasons a rational person would accept
- **Consistency:** standards applied similarly to similar cases

- **Reversibility:** standards that apply no matter who “makes” the rules

These are in a sense the rules of the ethics game, no matter with which school or approach to ethics one feels most closely to identity.

**The Utilitarian approach** is perhaps the most familiar and easiest to understand of all approaches to ethics. Whether we think about it or not, most of us are doing utilitarian ethics much of the time, especially those of us in business. The Utilitarian asks a very important question: “How will my actions affect others?” They then attempt to quantify the impact of their actions based on some least common denominator, such as happiness, pleasure, or wealth. Therefore, Utilitarians are also called “consequentialists”, because they look to the consequences of their actions to determine whether any particular act is justified.

“The greatest good for the greatest number” is the motto of the Utilitarian approach. Of course, defining “good” has been no easy task because what some people think of as good, others think of as worthless. When a businessperson does a cost benefit analysis, he/she is practicing Utilitarian ethics. In this case, the least common denominator is usually money. Everything from the cost of steel to the worth of a human life must be given a dollar value, and then one just does the math. The Ford Pinto automobile was a product of just such reasoning. Thirty years ago, executives at the Ford Motor Company reasoned the cost of fixing the gas-tank problem with their Pinto would cost more than the benefit of saving a few human lives. Several tanks did explode, people died, and the company lost lawsuits when judge and juries refused to accept these executives’ moral reasoning.

One of the most familiar uses of outcome-based reasoning is in legislative committees in representative democracies. How many constituents will benefit from a tax credit and how many will be diminished is the question before the Revenue Committee at tax rectification time. Representative democracies make most decisions

based on the Utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. Democratic governments are naturally majoritarian, though in constitutional democracies there are some things that cannot be decided by doing the math (adding up the votes). Some questions should never be voted on. The founders of our nation expressed this fundamental concept with three words: certain unalienable rights.

Enter the **Deontological Ethicists**. Immanuel Kant is the quintessential deontological (duty based) ethical theorist. Kant, who lived in eighteenth century Prussia, was one of the most amazing intellects of all time, writing books on astronomy, philosophy, politics and ethics. He once said, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe ... the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” For Kant there were some ethical verities as eternal as the stars.

Deontological simply means the study (or science) of duty. Kant did not believe that humans could predict future consequences with any substantial degree of certainty. Ethical theory based on a guess about future consequences appalled him. What he did believe was that if we use our facility of reason, we can determine with certainty our ethical duty. As to whether or not doing our duty would make things better or worse (and for whom), Kant was agnostic.

Duty-based ethics is enormously important for (though consistently ignored by) at least two kinds of folks: politicians and business people. It is also the key to a better understanding of our responsibilities as members of teams. Teams (like work groups or political campaign committees) are narrowly focused on achieving very clearly defined goals: winning the election, successfully introducing a new product, or winning a sailboat race. Sometimes a coach or a boss will say, “Look, just do whatever it takes.” Ethically, “whatever it takes”, means the ends justify the means. This was Kant’s fundamental criticism of the Utilitarians.

For Kant, there were some values (duties) that could never be sacrificed to the greater good. He wrote: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in thy own person or in that of any other, in

every case as an end withal, never as a means only.” Fellow team members, employees, campaign staffs, customers, partners, etc. are always to some extent means to our various goals (ends), but they are also persons. And persons, Kant believed, cannot be just used, they must also be respected in their own right, whether or not the goal is achieved. He called this absolute respect for persons a Categorical Imperative.

In any team situation the goal is critical, but treating team members with respect is imperative. Teams fall apart when a team member feels used or abused (treated as less important than the overall goal itself). Great leaders carry the double burden of achieving a worthwhile end without causing those who sacrifice to achieve the goal being treated as merely expendable means. Persons are never merely a means to an end. They are ends in themselves! We owe that understanding to Immanuel Kant.

It is one thing to understand that there are duties which do not depend on consequences; it is quite another to develop the character to act on those duties. This is where Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) comes in. Aristotle wrote the first systematic treatment of ethics in Western Civilization: *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Today we call his approach to ethics **virtue ethics**. For Aristotle and other Greek thinkers, virtue meant the excellence of a thing. The virtue of a knife is to cut; the virtue of a physician is to heal; the virtue of a lawyer is to seek justice. In this sense, Ethics becomes the discipline of discovering and practicing virtue. Aristotle begins his thinking about ethics by asking, “What do people desire?” He discovers the usual things— wealth, honor, physical and psychological security—but he realizes that these things are not ends in themselves; they are means to ends.

The ultimate end for a person, Aristotle taught, must be an end that is self-sufficient, “that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else”. This end of ends Aristotle designates with the Greek word *eudemonia*, usually translated by the English word happiness. But happiness does not do Aristotle or his ethics justice. Yes, *eudemonia* means happiness, but really

it means so much more. The problem is not with Aristotle's Greek word *eudemonia*, the problem is in our English word happiness.

Happiness in English comes from the ancient word *hap*, meaning chance, as in *happenstance*. "Why are you smiling", we ask, "did you win the lottery?" For Aristotle happiness was not something one acquired by chance. Happiness was the grand work of living; the very practice of being all that you can be. Fulfillment and flourishing are far better words to translate the concept contained in the Greek word *eudemonia*. For Aristotle, this state of virtue is achieved not by accident but through intent, reason and practice.

Aristotle thought that one discovers virtue by using the unique gift of human reasoning, that is, through rational contemplation. "The unexamined life is not worth living," said Socrates almost 100 years before Aristotle. Like Aristotle and Aristotle's teacher Plato, Socrates knew that we humans need to engage our brains before we open our mouths or spring into some decisive action. For Aristotle, the focus of that brain work was chiefly about how to balance between the fears and excesses in which the human condition always abounds. Between our fears (deficits) and exuberances (excesses) lies a sweet spot, the golden mean, called virtue.

At times of physical peril—say in a big storm on a small sailboat—a crew member may be immobilized by fear and unable to function, thus putting the lives of everyone on the sailboat in danger. Or the opposite could happen. A devil-may-care attitude in the face of real danger can as easily lead to disaster. Courage is the virtue located at the mean between cowardliness and rashness. Yet, identifying such a virtue and making that virtue part of one's character are two quiet different things. Aristotle thus distinguishes between intellectual virtue and practical virtue. Practical virtues are those developed by practice and are a part of a person's character, while intellectual virtue is simply the identification and understanding of a virtue.

Practice is how one learns to deal with fear; practice is how one learns to tell the truth; practice is how one learns to face both personal and professional conflicts. Practice is the genius of Aristotle's contribution to the development of ethics. He showed

that virtues do not become a part of our moral muscle fiber because we believe in them, or advocate them. Instead, virtues become characteristics of our selves by our exercising them. How does one learn to be brave in a storm at sea? “Just do it.”

The ultimate goal behind developing characteristics of virtue is eudemonia, a full flourishing of our self, true happiness. Practitioners of the Judaic-Christian tradition tend to think of ethics (or morality) as the business of figuring out how to be good rather than bad. That is not the true end of ethics so far as Aristotle was concerned. The end is a state of fulfillment; the ultimate goal is becoming who you truly are and realizing the potential you were born with—being at your best in every sense.

Just as the virtue of the knife is to cut and the virtue of the boat is to sail, the virtue of the self is to become the best of who it can be. This is happiness (eudemonia). Just as the well-trained athlete seeks to be in the zone (the state of perfect performance achieved by practice), Aristotle wrote about the truly virtuous life and the pursuit of eudemonia. Just as a perfectly trimmed sailboat glides through the water, effortlessly in synch with the waves and the wind, the man or woman in a state of eudemonia has achieved the state of earthly fulfillment.

All three approaches to ethics described above are principally focused on the individual: the singular conscience, rationally reflecting on the meaning of duty or responsibility, and in the case of Virtue ethics, the ethical athlete practicing and inculcating the capacity to achieve the state of eudemonia. **Communitarian Ethics** has quite a different point of departure: the community (or team, or group, or company, or culture) within which the individual engages him/herself is the critical context for ethical decision-making.

The Communitarian asks the important question, “What are the demands (duties) that the community(ies) of which I am a part make on me?” The Scottish ethicists W. D. Ross (himself a student of Aristotle) focused his own ethical reflections on the question of, “Where do ethical duties come from?” His answer was that they come from relationships. We know our duties toward fellow human



beings by the nature and quality of our relationships with them. The duties we owe a colleague in the workplace is different from the duties we owe a spouse; those duties are different from the duties we owe our country. The Communitarian asks us to look outward, and to face up to the duties of being social creatures. We define ourselves, and our responsibilities, by the company we keep.

Communitarians are quite critical today of the attitude of so many in our society who, while adamant about their individual rights, are negligent of their social duties. The “me generation” has created a need for a new breed of ethicists who insist that, from family and neighborhood to nation and global ecosystem, the communities in which we live require us to accept substantial responsibilities. Environmentalists, neighborhood activists, feminists, and globalists are some of the groups loosely identified today with the Communitarian Movement.

Amitai Etzioni, in *Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda* described the principles of this somewhat disorganized movement. Etzioni’s thesis is that we must pay more attention to common duties as opposed to individual rights. Our neighborhoods, he believes, can again be safe from crime without turning our country into a police state. Our families can once again flourish without forcing women to stay home and not enter the workforce. Our schools can provide, “essential moral education” without indoctrinating young people or violating the First Amendment’s prohibition of establishing religion.

The key to this social transformation is the communitarian belief in balancing rights and responsibilities: “Strong rights presume strong responsibilities.” Etzioni states the Communitarian Agenda:

Correcting the current imbalance between rights and responsibilities requires a four-point agenda: a moratorium on the minting of most, if not all, new rights; reestablishing the link between rights and responsibilities; recognizing that some responsibilities do not entail rights; and, most

carefully, adjusting some rights to the changed circumstances.

Here, if nothing else, is a frontal attack on the Libertarian mindset of our age.

Communitarianism is not new, at least if one defines it as an approach to ethics and value referencing significant communities of meaning. Most of the world's great religions are in this sense communitarian. It is from a community of faith that the faithful develops a sense of self and responsibility (or in Confucian thought, the extended family which nurtures this development). Ethics cannot be separated from the ethos of the religious or familial community. The modern communitarian movement may or may not be religiously inclined, yet it is clearly a part of a tradition of ethical approach as old as human association.

In the context of teams, the communitarian approach to ethics has much to commend itself. How much of one's personal agenda is one willing to sacrifice for the overall goal of winning a sailboat race? Under what conditions is one willing to let the values or culture of the team alter one's own ethical inclinations? To what extent do the relationships one has with team members give rise to duties that one is willing to honor? How willing is one to share the credit when the team succeeds? How willing is one to accept blame when the team loses? Under what conditions would one break with the team? If Ross is correct that duties come from relationships, paying attention to such questions about the company we keep may be more than a social obligation; perhaps, our ethical duty.

There are two pervasive ethical approaches not treated here: ethical egoism and The Divine Imperative. Each has a broad and dedicated following and each is deeply problematic to the ethical maturing of any society. Briefly, and with pejorative intent, here is what these extreme, yet interestingly similar approaches assert.

The ethical egoists say that ethics is a matter of doing what feels right to the individual conscience. If one asks, "Why did you do that?" The answer is, "Because I felt like it." The approach is often

dressed up with statements about being true to yourself: “let your conscience be your guide”, or “do the right thing”. But how does one know what is true for the self? How does one develop a conscience? How is one to know that doing what is right (what feels right to you) is the right thing to do?

If nothing else, ethical egoism is a conversation stopper! How does one communicate to colleagues, friends, children or any other human being when the reference point of behavior or ethical judgment is just about how one feels inside? How does a civil society emerge if we civilians cannot deliberate in common, understandable language about our motives, intents, values, or duties? In essence, ethical egoism is the ethics of teenagers rebelling against being answerable to outside authority. To teenagers, to enter the ethical dialogue is to take the radical risk of having one's values and actions challenged. Apparently, there are many of us who are just not grown up enough to risk that! Better to repeat the mantra: “I did what my conscience dictated.”

Just as there is no possible meaningful ethical dialogue with the Ethical Egoist, nor is there much hope of creative engagement with Divine Imperialists. For this growing community, ethics is the simple business of doing what God tells one to do. There is therefore no reason or need for discussion. The issue is conversion, not conversation. In a constitutional democracy like ours with a fundamental commitment to “the non-establishment of religion”, the Divine Imperialist is stuck with a difficult dilemma: either to make all ethical inquiry “personal” (that is, no social or political value deliberation), or take the ayatollah approach and bring no state into conformity with the revealed will of God. Divine Imperialists do not deliberate. They dictate, simply because there is nothing to deliberate about. God has spoken. It is in the book.

The flaw in the Divine Imperialists' approach is quite clear to everybody but them: If God is good, then He must reveal only good laws and rules. This creates two alternatives. The first is that there is a reference for “good” apart from the Divine itself. The only other, that God is undependable; that God is arbitrary; surely this is

unacceptable. God is not only good, but God wills the good. God's will, then, becomes a reality discoverable even apart from belief in a particular represented manifestation of God. Religion, at its best, should understand that faith confers no special status of ethical insight. Believers, agnostics, non-believers can, and do, contribute to the culture's continuing struggle to understand what is good, what is just, what is true. That is why democracies (as opposed to states founded upon some "Divine Right of Kings") survive.

*A Postscript on Narrative Ethics.* Among the professions, particularly medicine, law and counseling, narrative has become a powerful tool in developing ethical insights and perspective. To tell a story is to invite participation from the hearer, and it is to also a means of communicating the richness and complexity of human dilemmas. Narrative Ethics is simply diagnosis through story. Its benefit over the four traditional ethical approaches is that story invites both ethical engagement and ethical creativity. In business, as in law, a great deal of teaching is done through the use of cases. This is nothing more or less than using the pedagogy of narrative ethics. The narrative invites the hearer into the complexity of issues involved in personal, professional and organizational dilemmas, and provides a road through the complexity to the simplicity on the other side.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, an American jurist who wrote stunningly comprehensible decisions, even in some of the most complex cases imaginable, has a famous quote: "I would not give a fig for simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity." It is the role of narrative to lead us through the thickets of overwhelming complexity, to the clarity of enriched simplicity.

Of course, there are some people who congenitally can not stop to ask for directions when lost in life's thickets. For them, storytelling is a waste of time. The male mantra, "just cut to the chase" comes to mind. This may in part explain why women (feminist like Margaret Wheatley, for example) have such a fondness for narrative. At all stages of the ethical decision-making process,

narrative is a useful tool of analysis for exposing the facts, conflicts, feelings, and values that are the stuff of the human predicament.

## 6. Do You Have to Be an Expert to Practice Ethics?



*An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online*

here: <https://library.achievingthedream.org/epccintroethics1/?p=23>

Socrates famously asked whether ethics can be taught. It can, but should not be taught by rote memorization or indoctrination. Ethics seeks more than unreflective beliefs given by an outside authority figure without being tested for their truth or validity. Learning ethics is a matter of challenging opinions, wrestling intellectually with humanistic issues, and then maturing. Done well, it is active, interactive, enjoyable, and ends with personal development.

Perhaps the best way to teach ethics is to provide students with discussion opportunities that represent situations they will face themselves. This gives them a chance to express their opinion, and hear the opinions of other students as well as respected experts. In such disciplined discussions they each must find justifications for their views (or sometimes realize there are no ethical justifications for them). Such discussion helps students grow by developing, testing, and refining their ability to think more clearly about ethical problems. This is important as they are already immersed in both formal and informal codes of ethics in their daily lives.

Formal codes of ethics take various forms including rules, policies, professional standards, agreements/contracts, and code of ethics statements. Examples might include Human Resources training that

establishes standards relating to sexual harassment, student handbooks that define and outline consequences for academic dishonesty, or an employee contract that requires full disclosure of expenditures using company funds. In each case, the purpose of these formalized codes of ethics is to remove any ambiguity regarding what is considered ethical and unethical behavior in that specific environment.

More difficult to interpret are informal codes of ethics. By their nature, informal codes of ethics are unwritten, even unspoken at times; however, this does not negate their impact and significance (though it does create more room for ambiguity). Informal codes of ethics may involve community expectations, customs, or habits. They may involve conceptions about principles such as promises, trust, friendship, empathy and fairness. Informal codes of ethics may also derive from intuitive responses to situations. Students can be asked to consider: Does it feel wrong? Would you be proud to tell a loved one about the decision you made? Would you be comfortable having a full report on your decision detailed on primetime TV news?

Expertise is beneficial, but we can also draw from our everyday experiences, and make them relatable to students. The starting point is to be aware of our own values and beliefs, and whether we view a situation as an ethical dilemma. Learning ethics will not happen through rote memorization of theory and principles, but rather through debate, active learning, and intellectual consideration and reflection.

## 7. Ethical Dilemmas in Philosophy



### Ethical Dilemmas in Philosophy:

**The Ring of Gyges** was a mythical, magical artifact mentioned by the philosopher Plato in Book 2 of *The Republic*. It was said to grant its owner the power to become invisible at will. Plato puts the tale of this ring in the mouth of Glaucon, who uses it to make the point that no person is so virtuous that he could resist the temptation of being able to steal at will by the ring's power of invisibility. In contemporary terms, Glaucon argues that ethics is a social construction, whose source is the desire to maintain one's reputation for virtue and honesty. When that sanction is removed, ethics would evaporate. In other words, anyone who had the ability to be unseen in their actions, be it with a ring, or simply with the belief they will not be caught, would



abandon all ethical standards. Do you agree? Why or why not?

**The Prisoner's Dilemma** is a standard example of cooperation. Two members of a criminal-gang are arrested and imprisoned. Each prisoner is in solitary confinement with no means of communicating with the other. The prosecutors lack sufficient evidence to convict the pair on the principal charge. They hope to get both sentenced to a year in prison on a lesser charge. Simultaneously, the prosecutors offer each prisoner a bargain. Each prisoner is given the opportunity either to: betray the other by testifying that the other committed the crime, or to cooperate with the other by remaining silent. The offer is: If A and B each betray the other, each of them serves 2 years in prison.

## 8. The Origins of Philosophy: The Greeks and Us

At the time of Socrates (472–399 BC) many Greeks were no longer believers in the stories of the gods and goddesses. Those stories had provided them with guidance for their lives. They had believed that they could not go against the decrees of the deities and that they should follow the examples of the gods and goddesses which they knew of through the stories they all heard and memorized and repeated. They accepted ideas such as fate and destiny. Now they were hearing the stories being challenged and some declared their disbelief. The playwrights were raising questions on the stages. Some thought they could choose from among the tales those stories that supported whatever courses of conduct they choose. They believed that they could show that some god or other approved of the conduct because the god had done something similar. There were many who believed that morality was individual and relative.

At the time of Socrates Greek culture was undergoing a major revolution. They were transforming from an oral culture to a literate culture. They were acquiring paper and so they could write down the stories and the plays and important ideas. They no longer needed to memorize what they heard and repeat it as exactly as possible in order to transmit ideas. Plato could write down ideas and examine them. He could write questions and reasoned arguments for readers to reflect upon.

Today, there are many people who no longer effectively believe in the stories of the one god. There are many who are convinced that there are no universal moral codes and people need to determine their own morality. Further, the West is being transformed from a literate culture to an electronic culture. We are at the beginning of a period in which we are attempting to develop a morality for the new age.

Many no longer accept the idea of universal truth. We shall be examining how we arrived at this point starting back with the Greeks at the time of Socrates. What Philosophy became then and offered to people, it is still today and could offer to all of us if we were to pursue the philosophical approach to handling the issues and key questions. All of the key issues in Philosophy were quite apparent in the works of Plato and Aristotle. We shall take a rather brief look at the Greeks in order to understand how Philosophy arises within a culture and at the key issues. We shall also make comparisons to the present time in order to appreciate the relevance of all of this for each of us today.

This text shall make use of a theory about education developed by Alfred North Whitehead. Learning moves through stages. They are:

- Romance
- Precision
- Generalization

It starts with curiosity, a story, a problem. There is not much critical thinking at all. In the second stage there is a great deal of critical thinking focusing on the problem and paying attention to consistency, coherency and the non-contradiction criteria by which thought is to be evaluated. In the last stage there is a return to the flights of imagination again as the mind applies what is developed in the second stage and then applies it further.

There will be a good deal of story telling in the next chapter. You may find it very interesting and even a bit entertaining. In the remaining chapters the thinking will become more focused, intense and demanding.

#### BELIEF SYSTEMS, POST MODERNISM and UNCRITICAL THINKING

As people grow and mature and learn they acquire beliefs and entire belief systems. They do so through receiving and accepting as true stories about how things are in this world and in a realm beyond this one and through the beliefs implicit in ordinary

language and its usages. Thus are acquired assumptions and presuppositions for the thought processes entered into through life. In the beginning those acquiring such beliefs want to be accepted and even valued by the various groups of which they are or desire to be members, so there is an emphasis on acceptance of the beliefs shared by members of those groups and not on review or criticism of them. There is little, if any, reflective thought or critical thinking taking place. Little is needed if the majority of group members are operating with the beliefs without questioning of them.

Once acquired the belief systems function as a basis for the acquisition of additional beliefs. As another idea is presented it is placed within the context of the previously acquired beliefs and if the new candidate for inclusion is consistent with or coherent with the prior beliefs and ideas it is accepted as also being true. This is the coherentist theory of truth. The problem with that approach to truth is that there needs to be some other method for the establishment of the fundamental beliefs or else the entire structure of beliefs while internally coherent might not be supported by any evidence external to the beliefs themselves.

As belief systems expand they can reach a point where beliefs and ideas have been accepted too hastily and when a culture or individual reach a point where reflective thought can be afforded inconsistencies and perhaps even outright contradictions may appear upon reflection. Upon the first realization of problems, the belief systems will not be abandoned altogether and will not even be thrown into serious doubt. Rather there will be attempts to preserve the belief system through the introduction of qualifiers and alternate interpretations designed to account for what are to be termed “apparent” discrepancies. This process will continue until the introduction of the qualifiers and alternative interpretations reaches a point where they generate the need for even further such qualifiers and the process then becomes so burdensome that the fundamental beliefs and ideas may then come under the most careful scrutiny and there is an acceptance of a need for an

alternate set of beliefs that are more internally coherent and satisfying to demands of reason and the desire for external grounding.

This occurred in the time of Socrates when the many stories about the gods and goddesses were seen through the eyes of critical reasoning to be inconsistent and incoherent. For Socrates a basis for the grounding of morality and the social order was needed other than that provided by the stories of the Greek deities. In addition to sharing this realization with Socrates, Plato saw that the ideas and theories of the pre-Socratics were inconsistent and there was needed an alternate view of what made anything real and how one could know anything.

Now for Socrates, Plato and Aristotle the idea of the Greek deities came to make little sense in the light of reason and so the idea of a more abstract entity emerges with them as more satisfying as an explanation of origins and order. Their ideas satisfy the dictates of reason for which they abandoned the blind adherence to the stories of their ancestors. These are developments that mark the origins of philosophical thought in the West.

With other western religious belief systems there were also prompts to the development of a critical thought tradition. The early Hebrew deity is one that has apparent weaknesses and is not at all perfect in every way. It is jealous and vindictive and unjust. For the Christians the idea of the Hebrew deity was not going to be acceptable to those who had come under the influence of the Greek manner of thought. The Christians take the idea of the all perfect being, the source of all that is true, good and beautiful, from the Greeks and layer it over the idea of the single deity of the Hebrews. The ideas about the qualities of the early Hebrew god when combined ideas about the Greek ideal deity have made for many problems. The Western traditions treat the scriptures as being in some sense divinely inspired or authored and thus, for many in those traditions who are conservative and literalists, they carry the ideas of the early Hebrew deity along with them leading to complications as there arises the need to explain how an all good

deity and an all merciful deity can be so cruel and vindictive as in some of the stories in the early books or chapters of the scriptures. The Problem of Evil arises as an attempt to give an account that makes sense as to how an all perfect being could exist at the same time that there exists moral evil. Troubles with a simple belief prompt critical reflection and the desire to use reason to support the belief system. Consideration of the troublesome issues led to Augustine and Aquinas moving beyond the traditions of faith and into philosophical thought and a reliance on reason to interpret and defend key beliefs in the Christian tradition.

In recent times people acquire beliefs and ideas that are originating from several different belief systems and periods: the classical, modern and post modern. Unfortunately, most start out by an unconscious acceptance that has them holding beliefs without question despite the many inconsistencies and incoherent features of the resultant collection. They accept the ideas as true as they originate from authorities and as they are shared in by peers. They accept out of a desire to be accepted and to please. The general post modern culture promotes uncritical thought patterns and so there are no prompts for reflective or critical thought.

Among the contradictory beliefs are the ideas that are held simultaneously of relativism and absolutism, empiricism and idealism, freedom and determinism, materialism and a non-physical mind. Among the many odd combinations of beliefs are:

- A single deity must exist and everyone is entitled to believe in whatever they wish concerning the deity and it will be true.
- Reality consists of physical and spiritual entities and reality is whatever any group agrees that it is.
- There are moral wrong or evil acts and whatever people think is morally correct is morally correct for them.
- There are evil acts and there is no one way to declare anything to be evil.
- We must make moral judgments for our safety and survival and that no one should make moral judgments about other people

and their behaviors.

- There are true and false claims and truth is not objective.
- There is knowledge and there is no absolute or objective or certain knowledge.
- Science is to be valued and trusted and folklore, mythology and spiritualism are equally acceptable sources of knowledge.
- Human behavior is the result of causal factors and of what is fated or destined for each human and humans are totally free to decide for themselves what they will do.

Philosophy emerges within a culture when the belief systems no longer answer all the important questions and there are realized to be problems with the accepted set of beliefs. One of the many problems with the post-modern belief set is that there are no contradictions or difficulties with belief sets that need to be addressed because contradictions and inconsistencies are acceptable as there are no objective criteria for thought to satisfy and so there is no need for the formal school system to be developing critical thinking concerning them. Instead there is an exaggerated and harmful accenting of the value of tolerance of all beliefs and beliefs systems. Opinions are not to be distinguished from proven claims, there being no objective knowledge, and every claim is merely opinion. The inherited beliefs and beliefs systems are not examined within the formal educational system as it is infused throughout with post modern relativism. Many of the teachers are themselves possessed of the incoherent belief systems.

So, many students arrive in colleges with poor habits of mind and beset with beliefs that are incoherent and contradictory. Further, they are possessed of beliefs that make the development of their critical thinking skills very difficult. Some believe that all claims are opinions and that there is no reason for them to examine ideas and beliefs that they hold as they are entitled to hold whatever beliefs they choose to hold and they choose to remain within their social sets and to do so they believe that they need to continue to hold the

belief systems that are popular with those groupings and in some cases define those groups.

Mental habits and belief systems are not easily disturbed or called into serious question when they perform useful functions for the believer and do so in a powerful manner.

If a belief system offers hope and consolation in the face of death of a loved one or anticipated death of one's own self then there is a very strong impulse to retain those beliefs for fear of the intellectual chaos that is feared would result by the rejection of the familiar belief system. Further, there is the fear that in accepting another belief system one is disloyal to those groups to which one belongs that hold that belief set in common. Perhaps most influential in the decision to retain the beliefs that comfort one is the desire to have a soul that survives the death of the physical body and to have an eternal life in unimaginable pleasure which are thought to be lost if the belief system is rejected for another in which such desires are not guaranteed to be fulfilled.

The ability to have control over one's beliefs may also be so valued that many would exercise the choice to maintain the old comforting beliefs as a display of that ability thus maintaining the illusion of control rather than to view the choice of examination and possible revision or rejection of the belief system as another experience offering evidence of the ability to control some aspect of one's life. It is far simpler and economical to conserve beliefs than to consider revisions thereof. Accepting and continuing beliefs that one is presented with is far less taxing in effort than the careful and critical examination of belief systems and the evaluation and decision making involved in the development and maintenance of a belief systems that is coherent and supported by evidence.

People want to hold whatever beliefs that they choose to hold and give no account for them other than to assert their right to hold whatever beliefs they choose and to insist that they must be tolerated in doing so by all others.

One of the accepted beliefs is that of tolerance as a value of the highest social importance. Tolerance is a value expounded upon



in a post modern culture as supportive of the relativism that is an essential component of the post modern epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. Tolerance is not to be questioned as a value as it is promoted as a cornerstone to a desirable social arrangement.

Yet tolerance itself is a disvalue as post modernists would have promoted it. Tolerance is not respect. To be tolerant is to put up with something. It does not include accepting it or considering it as valuable or worthy. Tolerance of people and beliefs is promoted but it is misguided and harmful whenever to be tolerant of behaviors and ideas would hurt individuals and groups in physical and emotional ways.

Those who advocate tolerance cannot possibly be sincere in doing so. This is so because they do not advocate being tolerant of:

- Rapists
- Murderers
- Child molesters
- Racists
- Misogynists
- Intolerant Groups and Individuals

They cannot be tolerant of such people and expect their promotion of tolerance to be accepted by others.

Post modern pluralists continue to promote tolerance as if it were unqualified for they do not and expect no one else will subject their promotion to critical examination for such an examination would not be popular or “politically correct”. They continue to promote tolerance as if it were unqualified for they do not hold careful and critical thought as being valuable as they believe that such thought challenges relativism. They also mistakenly believe that critical thinking is somehow intolerant of individuals, groups and behaviors and beliefs they wish to have accepted. The formal educational system promotes an uncritical tolerance and the belief in such and value of such.

Finally, PHILOSOPHY , OPINIONS and RIGHT ANSWERS

Most folks think very little about Philosophy. Of those who do many have some erroneous ideas about the discipline and its history. One of the most troublesome, for Philosophers, of the mistaken ideas is that it is about opinions. This idea when followed by the ideas that opinions are all humans have with which to think and all opinions are pretty much of equal value, these two ideas run directly opposed to what philosophers are attempting to do. Philosophers quest after wisdom, which for John Dewey, is the quest to use what we know to gain what we most value. Philosophers do this by using critical thinking concerning all that humans claim to know and to value. This quickly becomes a quite involved process, examining the meaning of the word “knowledge” and other ideas such as; reality, truth, certainty, and value, among many other basic terms. Philosophers take positions on the questions, issues and problems faced by the most critical of thinkers examining the most basic concerns that humans can entertain with thoughtful reflection.

Philosophers use critical thinking and reason and evidence to support the claims that they make and the positions that they hold. This is quite different than merely making a claim , a statement, which is supported by nothing and thus an expression of the speaker’s opinion. Philosophers are willing to examine all claims and all positions with their supporting reasoning and evidence. They examine it looking for any flaws or problems. They want the most satisfactory, and at times satisfying answers and solutions, to the questions and problems.

#### PHILOSOPHY: LOOKING for the BEST RAFTS

With Plato and his mentor Socrates we have a description of what Philosophy is about. Humans are on a journey. En route they face obstacles to overcome. Major questions, problems and issues are like rivers that need to be crossed. Now along one side of the river there are these rafts. When you reach the river you may select any raft you want to use to get across the river. There are many different types. There are more than enough for everyone. They differ in color, shape, materials, method of construction and

size. You want to select the best possible raft with which to cross the river. No raft is perfect. Each raft has a problem. Each raft takes on water. Some take on a lot and some very little. Some are put together in a very shoddy manner and some are very well constructed.

Some people select the raft to use based on its color. They like certain colors and have a favorite and that is all they care about. Others select their rafts based on size and they want the biggest one they can find. Each who selects has a reason and a method for the selection. What a reasonable sensible person should want is the best possible raft that will carry its occupants across the river safely.

Philosophy is a method of thinking used to make the best possible selection of the raft which is the answer to the most basic questions that humans have about life, knowledge, truth, goodness, beauty, etc...

Philosophers hope to develop the best possible position and hope that it will do well when tested. Over the centuries those positions philosophers thought were the best have been revealed to have problems. New rafts were constructed and tested and found wanting again. So, Philosophy is the quest for the best possible raft, knowing that it is highly probable that there is **no perfect** raft. As humans advance and progress and gather more experiences and develop more critical analysis and evaluation techniques philosophical positions are examined more closely and tested more thoroughly. Philosophy is a process. It is a method of thinking and as our knowledge grows so too will philosophy take all of it into consideration as the method attempts to produce the BEST POSSIBLE answers to the most important questions.

Some folks look for the “correct ” answer to a question or the “right” solution to a problem. Philosophers have learned that what they do is look for the best possible answers and solutions. So we shall look now at how Socrates developed a better method for finding the best answers and then we shall examine several important questions or issues and look at what philosophers have done with them over time. In all of this the focus should be on the

method of thinking that aims to arrive at the best possible, if not perfect, answers, solutions and positions.

But perhaps some prefer the comforts of beliefs even of blind faith to the effort at reaching positions closer to the truth. For many this choice is a real dilemma presenting a difficult choice. This sort of choice has been presented to humans in the story of Adam and Eve and again represented in the movie *The Matrix*.

## 9. Socrates



In his use of critical reasoning, by his unwavering commitment to truth, and through the vivid example of his own life, fifth-century Athenian Socrates set the standard for all subsequent Western philosophy. Since he left no literary legacy of his own, we are dependent upon contemporary writers like Aristophanes and [Xenophon](#) for our information about his life and work. As a pupil of Archelaus during his youth, Socrates showed a great deal of interest in the scientific theories of [Anaxagoras](#), but he later abandoned inquiries into the physical world for a dedicated investigation of the development of moral character. Having served with some distinction as a soldier at Delium and Amphipolis during the Peloponnesian War, Socrates dabbled in the political turmoil that consumed Athens after the War, then retired from active life to work as a stonemason and to raise his children with his wife, Xanthippe. After inheriting a modest fortune from his father, the sculptor Sophroniscus, Socrates used his marginal financial independence as an opportunity to give full-time attention to inventing the practice of philosophical dialogue. For the rest of his life, Socrates devoted himself to free-wheeling discussion with the aristocratic young citizens of Athens, insistently questioning their unwarranted confidence in the truth of popular opinions, even though he often offered them no clear alternative teaching. Unlike the professional [Sophists](#) of the time, Socrates pointedly declined to accept payment for his work with students, but despite (or, perhaps, because) of this lofty disdain for material success, many of them were fanatically loyal to him. Their parents, however, were often displeased with his influence on their offspring, and his earlier association with opponents of the democratic regime had already made him a controversial political figure. Although the

amnesty of 405 forestalled direct prosecution for his political activities, an Athenian jury found other charges—corrupting the youth and interfering with the religion of the city—upon which to



convict Socrates, and they sentenced him to death in 399 B.C.E. Accepting this outcome with remarkable grace, Socrates [drank hemlock and died](#) in the company of his friends and disciples.

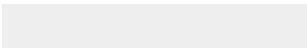
Our best sources of information about Socrates's philosophical views are the early dialogues of his student [Plato](#), who attempted there to provide a faithful picture of the methods and teachings of the master. (Although Socrates also appears as a character in the later dialogues of Plato, these writings more often express philosophical positions Plato himself developed long after Socrates's death.) In the Socratic dialogues, his extended conversations with students, statesmen, and friends invariably aim at understanding and achieving [virtue](#) {Gk. [ἀρετή](#) [[aretê](#)]} through the careful application of a [dialectical](#) method that employs critical inquiry to undermine the plausibility of widely-held doctrines. Destroying the illusion that we already comprehend the world perfectly and honestly accepting the fact of our own ignorance, Socrates believed, are vital steps toward our acquisition of genuine knowledge, by discovering universal definitions of the key concepts governing human life.

Interacting with an arrogantly confident young man in [Εὐθύφρων](#) ([EUTHYPHRO](#)), for example, Socrates [systematically refutes the superficial notion of piety \(moral rectitude\)](#) as doing



whatever is pleasing to the gods. Efforts to define morality by reference to any external authority, he argued, inevitably founder in [a significant logical dilemma about the origin of the good](#). Plato's [Απολογία \(APOLOGY\)](#) is an account of Socrates's (unsuccessful) speech in his own defense before the Athenian jury; it includes a detailed description of [the motives and goals of philosophical activity](#) as he practiced it, together with a passionate declaration of its value for life. The [Κριτόν \(CRITO\)](#) reports that during Socrates's imprisonment he responded to [friendly efforts to secure his escape](#) by seriously debating whether or not it would be right for him to do so. He concludes to the contrary that an individual citizen—even when the victim of unjust treatment—can never be [justified in refusing to obey the laws of the state](#).

The Socrates of the [Μένων \(MENO\)](#) tries to determine [whether or not virtue can be taught](#), and this naturally leads to a careful investigation of the nature of virtue itself. Although his direct answer is that virtue is unteachable, Socrates does propose [the doctrine of recollection](#) to explain why we nevertheless are in possession of significant knowledge about such matters. Most remarkably, Socrates argues here that knowledge and virtue are so closely related that [no human agent ever knowingly does evil](#): we all invariably do what we believe to be best. Improper conduct, then, can only be a product of our ignorance rather than a symptom of [weakness of the will](#) {Gk. [ακρασία \[akrásia\]](#)}. The same view is also defended in the [Πρωταγόρας \(PROTAGORAS\)](#), along with the belief that all of the virtues must be cultivated together.



## 10. Plato

In his earliest literary efforts, Plato (427–347 BCE) tried to convey the spirit of Socrates's teaching by presenting accurate reports of [the master's conversational interactions](#), for which these dialogues are our primary source of information. Early dialogues are typically devoted to investigation of a single issue, about which a conclusive result is rarely achieved. Thus, the [Εὐθυφρόν \(EUTHYPHRO\)](#) raises a significant doubt about whether morally right action can be [defined in terms of divine approval](#) by pointing out a significant [dilemma about any appeal to authority](#) in defence of moral judgments. The [Ἀπολογία \(APOLOGY\)](#) offers a description of [the philosophical life](#) as Socrates presented it in his own [defense before the Athenian jury](#). The [Κρίτων \(CRITO\)](#) uses the [circumstances of Socrates's imprisonment](#) to ask whether an individual citizen is ever [justified in refusing to obey](#) the state. The son of wealthy and influential Athenian parents, Plato began his philosophical career as a student of [Socrates](#). When the master died, Plato travelled to Egypt and Italy, studied with students of [Pythagoras](#), and spent several years advising the ruling family of Syracuse. Eventually, he returned to Athens and established his own school of philosophy at the Academy. For students enrolled there, Plato tried both to pass on



the heritage of a Socratic style of thinking and to guide their progress through mathematical learning to the achievement of abstract philosophical truth. The written dialogues on which his enduring reputation rests also serve both of

these aims.

Although they continue to use the talkative Socrates as a fictional

character, [the middle dialogues](#) of Plato develop, express, and defend his own, more firmly established, conclusions about central philosophical issues. Beginning with the [Μένων \(MENO\)](#), for example, Plato not only reports the Socratic notion that [no one knowingly does wrong](#), but also introduces [the doctrine of recollection](#) in an attempt to



discover whether or not [virtue can be taught](#). The [Φαιδων \(PHAEDO\)](#) continues development of Platonic notions by presenting the doctrine of the [Forms](#) in support of [a series of arguments](#) that claim to demonstrate [the immortality of the human soul](#).

The masterpiece among the middle dialogues is Plato's [Πολιτεια \(REPUBLIC\)](#). It begins with a Socratic conversation about [the nature of justice](#) but proceeds directly to [an extended discussion](#) of the [virtues](#) (Gk. [αρετη \[aretê\]](#)) of [justice](#) (Gk. [δικαιοσυνη \[dikaiôsunê\]](#)), [wisdom](#) (Gk. [σοφια \[sophía\]](#)), [courage](#) (Gk. [ανδρεια \[andreia\]](#)), and [moderation](#) (Gk. [σωφροσυνη \[sophrosúnê\]](#)) as they appear both in [individual human beings](#) and in [society as a whole](#). This plan for the ideal society or person requires detailed accounts of [human knowledge](#) and of the kind of [educational program](#) by which it may be achieved by [men and women alike](#), captured in a powerful image of the possibilities for human life in the [allegory of the cave](#). The dialogue concludes with a review of various [forms of government](#), an explicit description of the ideal state, in which [only philosophers are fit to rule](#), and an attempt to show that [justice is better than injustice](#). Among the [other dialogues](#) of this period are Plato's treatments of human

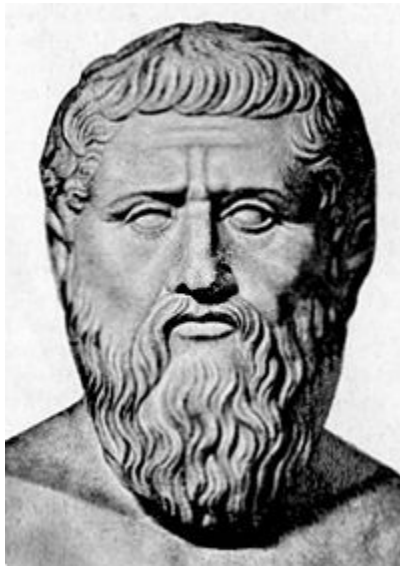


emotion in general and of love in particular in the [Φαίδρος](#) (PHAEDRUS) and [Συμπόσιον](#) (SYMPOSIUM).

Plato's later writings often modify or completely abandon the formal structure of dialogue. They include a critical examination of the theory of forms in [Παρμενίδης](#) (PARMENIDES), an extended discussion of the problem of knowledge in [Θεαίτητος](#) (THEAETETUS), cosmological speculations in [Τίμαιος](#) (Timaeus), and an interminable treatment of government in the unfinished [Λέξεις](#) (LAWS).

## II. Where Does Good Come From?

### Highlights of Plato's, "The Euthyphro"



*Statue of Plato*

Plato's Question:

What is it to be pious?

He is not looking for a list of things that are pious

He is not looking for a property that (even all) pious things have.

Euthyphro's (best?) answer:

To be pious is to be loved by all the gods.

Plato's Argument against Euthyphro's answer:

Perhaps all and only those things/actions that are loved by the gods are pious. But why is that? Are pious things loved by the gods because they are pious, or are they pious because they are loved by the gods?

Socrates and Euthyphro agree that they must be loved by the gods because they are pious.

But, says Socrates, in that case, being pious cannot be the same thing as being god-beloved. Because something that is god-beloved is so because it is loved by the gods. But something that is pious isn't so because it is loved by the gods; rather, it is loved by the gods because it is pious. Being loved by the gods causes god-belovedness, but being loved by the gods does not cause piety. So god-belovedness and piety cannot be the same thing.

(This kind of argument will be relevant again in the selection from Moore that we're reading for Wednesday.)

The "Euthyphro Problem"

Socrates' question about whether what's loved by the gods is pious because it is loved by them, or loved by them because it is pious, forms the lynchpin of an important contemporary debate about what moral philosophers call "Divine Command Theory."

According to DCT, morally good actions are good because they are commanded by God. But this invites a question: Why does God command those actions?

One answer (Socrates's) is that God commands them because they are good. But if this is so, DCT must be wrong, because then there must be an independent standard of goodness that God uses to decide which actions are good.

But what if we instead say that there is no such independent standard – that God's will determines which actions are good: the good ones are good because he has commanded them?

This answer avoids the problem of the independent standard. But it seems to invite three new

problems:

(1) The problem of arbitrariness:

Since, according to this answer, God can't be deciding what to command on the basis of what is morally good (since this has yet to be determined), his decision seems arbitrary – we might worry he's commanding on a whim. But in general, commands issued on a whim and for no good reason do not generate moral obligations. Why think we have reason to follow the arbitrary commands of a whimsical God?

(2) The problem of triviality:

We might be tempted to say that God wills as he does because he is good. But if, as DCT claims, God's will is the source of goodness, to say God is good-willed is just to say that God's will is as he wills it to be. But that seems (at least close to) tautologous – it seem like an empty claim. And we would have thought that divine command theorists intended to say something more substantive than this when they called God good-willed... (But it's worth noting the claim that God's will is as he wills it to be is not quite a tautology...)

(3) The problem of abhorrent commands:

If God's will determines what actions are good, and there are no independent moral standards guiding God's choice of what to command, then DCT seems to entail that God could have commanded us to rape, murder, and pillage, and then those actions would have been good. But that seems clearly false – those actions, surely, could never have been good.

Relatedly, it seems like once we fix all of an actions "natural" properties – how much pain it causes, and who commits it, and why, and when, and whether any

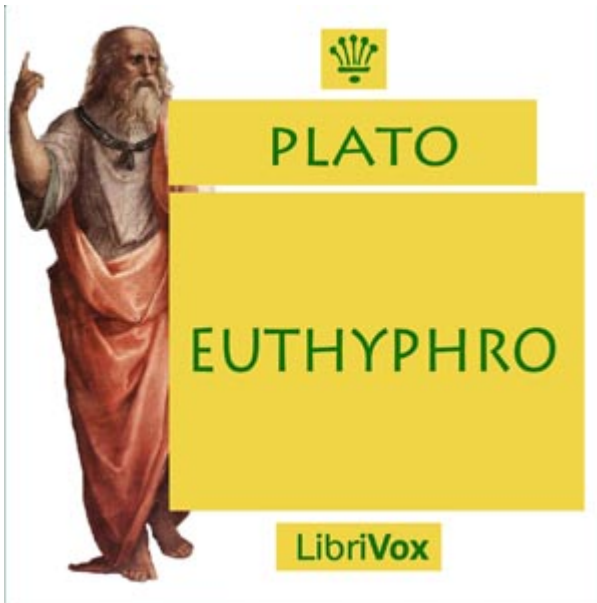
promises were broken, etc.,  
that should be enough to determine its moral properties: whether or not it's good. It doesn't seem like a good action might have had all the same natural properties but might not have been good. But DCT seems to contradict this: DCT suggests that had God willed differently, the same action that is in fact good might have been bad, despite having all of the same natural properties.

Replies: The proposal that God doesn't command according to an independent moral standard needn't entail his commands are arbitrary - e.g., perhaps he commands as he does out of love; and a loving God might not have been capable of issuing abhorrent commands. And perhaps a divine command theorist could hold that if God had not been loving, his commands would not have given rise to moral obligations...? (But why think this, if not because we think only a loving God's commands would live up to independent standards of goodness?)



## 12. Audio of Euthyphro Dialogue

[https://archive.org/details/euthyphro\\_librivox](https://archive.org/details/euthyphro_librivox)



# 13. Euthyphro Dilemma

The **Euthyphro dilemma** is found in [Plato](#)'s dialogue [Euthyphro](#), in which [Socrates](#) asks [Euthyphro](#), "Is the [pious](#) (τὸ ὅσιον) loved by the [gods](#) because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (10a)

The [dilemma](#) has had a major effect on the philosophical [theism](#) of the [monotheistic religions](#), but in a modified form: "Is what is [morally good](#) commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?"<sup>[1]</sup> Ever since Plato's original discussion, this question has presented a problem for some theists, though others have thought it a [false dilemma](#), and it continues to be an object of theological and philosophical discussion today.

## The dilemma

Socrates and Euthyphro discuss the nature of piety in Plato's [Euthyphro](#). Euthyphro proposes (6e) that the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) is the same thing as that which is loved by the gods (τὸ θεοφιλές), but Socrates finds a problem with this proposal: the gods may disagree among themselves (7e). Euthyphro then revises his definition, so that piety is only that which is loved by all of the gods unanimously (9e).

At this point the [dilemma](#) surfaces. Socrates asks whether the gods love the pious because it is the pious, or whether the pious is pious only because it is loved by the gods (10a). Socrates and Euthyphro both contemplate the first option: surely the gods love the pious because it is the pious. But this means, Socrates argues, that we are forced to reject the second option: the fact that the gods love something cannot explain why the pious is the pious (10d). Socrates points out that if both options were true, they together

would yield a vicious circle, with the gods loving the pious because it is the pious, and the pious being the pious because the gods love it. And this in turn means, Socrates argues, that the pious is not the same as the god-beloved, for what makes the pious the pious is not what makes the god-beloved the god-beloved. After all, what makes the god-beloved the god-beloved is the fact that the gods love it, whereas what makes the pious the pious is something else (9d-11a). Thus Euthyphro's theory does not give us the very *nature* of the pious, but at most a *quality* of the pious (11ab).

## In philosophical theism

The dilemma can be modified to apply to philosophical theism, where it is still the object of theological and philosophical discussion, largely within the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. As [German philosopher](#) and [mathematician Gottfried Leibniz](#) presented this version of the dilemma: "It is generally agreed that whatever God wills is good and just. But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just; in other words, whether justice and Goodness are arbitrary or whether they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things."<sup>[2]</sup>

Many philosophers and theologians have addressed the Euthyphro dilemma since the time of Plato, though not always with reference to the Platonic dialogue. According to scholar [Terence Irwin](#), the issue and its connection with Plato was revived by Ralph Cudworth and Samuel Clarke in the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>[3]</sup> More recently, it has received a great deal of attention from contemporary philosophers working in [metaethics](#) and the [philosophy of religion](#). Philosophers and theologians aiming to defend theism against the threat of the dilemma have developed a variety of responses.

# God commands it because it is right

## *Supporters*

The first horn of the dilemma (i.e. that which is right is commanded by God *because it is right*) goes by a variety of names, including [intellectualism](#), [rationalism](#), [realism](#), [naturalism](#), and [objectivism](#). Roughly, it is the view that there are independent moral standards: some actions are right or wrong in themselves, independent of God's commands. This is the view accepted by Socrates and Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue. The [Mu'tazilah](#) school of [Islamic theology](#) also defended the view (with, for example, [Nazzam](#) maintaining that God is powerless to engage in injustice or lying),<sup>[4]</sup> as did the [Islamic philosopher Averroes](#).<sup>[5]</sup> [Thomas Aquinas](#) never explicitly addresses the Euthyphro dilemma, but Aquinas scholars often put him on this side of the issue.<sup>[6][7]</sup> Aquinas draws a distinction between what is good or evil in itself and what is good or evil because of God's commands,<sup>[8]</sup> with unchangeable moral standards forming the bulk of [natural law](#).<sup>[9]</sup> Thus he contends that not even God can change the [Ten Commandments](#) (adding, however, that God *can* change what individuals deserve in particular cases, in what might look like special dispensations to murder or steal).<sup>[10]</sup> Among later [Scholastics](#), [Gabriel Vásquez](#) is particularly clear-cut about obligations existing prior to anyone's will, even God's.<sup>[11][12]</sup> [Modern](#) natural law theory saw [Grotius](#) and [Leibniz](#) also putting morality prior to [God's will](#), comparing moral truths to unchangeable mathematical truths, and engaging [voluntarists](#) like [Pufendorf](#) in philosophical controversy.<sup>[13]</sup> [Cambridge Platonists](#) like [Benjamin Whichcote](#) and [Ralph Cudworth](#) mounted seminal attacks on voluntarist theories, paving the way for the later rationalist [metaethics](#) of [Samuel Clarke](#) and [Richard Price](#).<sup>[14][15][16]</sup> what emerged was a view on which eternal moral standards, though dependent on God in some way, exist independently of God's will and prior to God's commands. Contemporary [philosophers of](#)

[religion](#) who embrace this horn of the Euthyphro dilemma include [Richard Swinburne](#)<sup>[17][18]</sup> and [T. J. Mawson](#)<sup>[19]</sup> (though see below for complications).

## *Criticisms*

- [Sovereignty](#): If there are moral standards independent of God's will, then "[t]here is something over which God is not sovereign. God is bound by the laws of morality instead of being their establisher. Moreover, God depends for his goodness on the extent to which he conforms to an independent moral standard. Thus, God is not absolutely independent."<sup>[20]</sup> 18th-century philosopher [Richard Price](#), who takes the first horn and thus sees morality as "necessary and immutable", sets out the objection as follows: "It may seem that this is setting up something distinct from God, which is independent of him, and equally eternal and necessary."<sup>[21]</sup>
- [Omnipotence](#): These moral standards would limit God's power: not even God could oppose them by commanding what is evil and thereby making it good. This point was influential in Islamic theology: "In relation to God, objective values appeared as a limiting factor to His power to do as He wills... [Ash'ari](#) got rid of the whole embarrassing problem by denying the existence of objective values which might act as a standard for God's action."<sup>[22]</sup> Similar concerns drove the medieval voluntarists [Duns Scotus](#) and [William of Ockham](#).<sup>[23]</sup> As contemporary philosopher [Richard Swinburne](#) puts the point, this horn "seems to place a restriction on God's power if he cannot make any action which he chooses obligatory... [and also] it seems to limit what God can command us to do. God, if he is to be God, cannot command us to do what, independently of his will, is wrong."<sup>[24]</sup>
- [Freedom of the will](#): Moreover, these moral standards would limit God's freedom of will: God could not command anything

opposed to them, and perhaps would have no choice but to command in accordance with them.<sup>[25]</sup> As [Mark Murphy](#) puts the point, “if moral requirements existed prior to God’s willing them, requirements that an impeccable God could not violate, God’s liberty would be compromised.”<sup>[26]</sup>

- [Morality without God](#): If there are moral standards independent of God, then morality would retain its authority even if God did not exist. This conclusion was explicitly (and notoriously) drawn by early modern political theorist [Hugo Grotius](#): “What we have been saying [about the natural law] would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to him”<sup>[27]</sup> On such a view, God is no longer a “law-giver” but at most a “law-transmitter” who plays no vital role in the foundations of morality.<sup>[28]</sup> [Nontheists](#) have capitalized on this point, largely as a way of disarming [moral arguments for God’s existence](#): if morality does not depend on God in the first place, such arguments stumble at the starting gate.<sup>[29]</sup>

## *Responses to criticisms*

Contemporary philosophers Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz take the first horn of the dilemma, branding divine command theory a “subjective theory of value” that makes morality arbitrary.<sup>[30]</sup> They accept a theory of morality on which, “right and wrong, good and bad, are in a sense independent of what *anyone* believes, wants, or prefers.”<sup>[31]</sup> They do not address the aforementioned problems with the first horn, but do consider a related problem concerning God’s omnipotence: namely, that it might be handicapped by his inability to bring about what is independently evil. To this they reply that God is omnipotent, even though there are states of affairs he cannot bring about: omnipotence is a matter of “maximal power”, not an ability to bring

about all possible states of affairs. And supposing that it is impossible for God not to exist, then since there cannot be more than one omnipotent being, it is therefore impossible for any being to have more power than God (e.g., a being who is omnipotent but not [omnibenevolent](#)). Thus God's omnipotence remains intact.<sup>[32]</sup>

[Richard Swinburne](#) and [T. J. Mawson](#) have a slightly more complicated view. They both take the first horn of the dilemma when it comes to *necessary* moral truths. But divine commands are not totally irrelevant, for God and his will can still affect *contingent* moral truths.<sup>[33][34][18][19]</sup> On the one hand, the most fundamental moral truths hold true regardless of whether God exists or what God has commanded: "Genocide and torturing children are wrong and would remain so whatever commands any person issued."<sup>[24]</sup> This is because, according to Swinburne, such truths are true as a matter of [logical necessity](#): like the laws of logic, one cannot deny them without contradiction.<sup>[35]</sup> This parallel offers a solution to the aforementioned problems of God's sovereignty, omnipotence, and freedom: namely, that these necessary truths of morality pose no more of a threat than the laws of logic.<sup>[36][37][38]</sup> On the other hand, there is still an important role for God's will. First, there are some divine commands that can directly create moral obligations: e.g., the command to worship on Sundays instead of on Tuesdays.<sup>[39]</sup> Notably, not even these commands, for which Swinburne and Mawson take the second horn of the dilemma, have ultimate, underived authority. Rather, they create obligations only because of God's role as creator and sustainer and indeed owner of the universe, together with the necessary moral truth that we owe some limited consideration to benefactors and owners.<sup>[40][41]</sup> Second, God can make an *indirect* moral difference by deciding what sort of universe to create. For example, whether a public policy is morally good might indirectly depend on God's creative acts: the policy's goodness or badness might depend on its effects, and those effects would in turn depend on the sort of universe God has decided to create.<sup>[42][43]</sup>

# It is right because God commands it

## *Supporters*

The second horn of the dilemma (i.e. that which is right is right because it is *commanded* by God) is sometimes known as [divine command theory](#) or [voluntarism](#). Roughly, it is the view that there are no moral standards other than God's will: without God's commands, nothing would be right or wrong. This view was partially defended by [Duns Scotus](#), who argued that not all [Ten Commandments](#) belong to the [Natural Law](#). Scotus held that while our duties to God (found on the first tablet) are [self-evident](#), [true by definition](#), and unchangeable even by God, our duties to others (found on the second tablet) were arbitrarily willed by God and are within his power to revoke and replace.<sup>[44][45][46]</sup> [William of Ockham](#) went further, contending that (since there is no contradiction in it) God could command us not to love God<sup>[47]</sup> and even to *hate* God.<sup>[48]</sup> Later [Scholastics](#) like [Pierre D'Ailly](#) and his student [Jean de Gerson](#) explicitly confronted the Euthyphro dilemma, taking the voluntarist position that God does not "command good actions because they are good or prohibit evil ones because they are evil; but... these are therefore good because they are commanded and evil because prohibited."<sup>[49]</sup> [Protestant](#) reformers [Martin Luther](#) and [John Calvin](#) both stressed the absolute sovereignty of God's will, with Luther writing that "for [God's] will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it,"<sup>[50]</sup> and Calvin writing that "everything which [God] wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of his willing it."<sup>[51]</sup> The voluntarist emphasis on God's absolute power was carried further by [Descartes](#), who notoriously held that God had freely created the eternal truths of [logic](#) and [mathematics](#), and that God was therefore capable of giving [circles](#) unequal [radii](#),<sup>[52]</sup> giving [triangles](#) other than 180 internal degrees, and even making [contradictions](#) true.<sup>[53]</sup> Descartes explicitly seconded Ockham: "why should [God] not have been able to give



this command [i.e., the command to hate God] to one of his creatures?”<sup>[54]</sup> [Thomas Hobbes](#) notoriously reduced the justice of God to “irresistible power”<sup>[55]</sup> (drawing the complaint of [Bishop Bramhall](#) that this “overturns... all law”).<sup>[56]</sup> And [William Paley](#) held that all moral obligations bottom out in the self-interested “urge” to avoid [Hell](#) and enter [Heaven](#) by acting in accord with God’s commands.<sup>[57]</sup> Islam’s [Ash’arite theologians](#), [al-Ghazali](#) foremost among them, embraced voluntarism: scholar George Hourani writes that the view “was probably more prominent and widespread in Islam than in any other civilization.”<sup>[58][59]</sup> [Wittgenstein](#) said that of “the two interpretations of the Essence of the Good”, that which holds that “the Good is good, in virtue of the fact that God wills it” is “the deeper”, while that which holds that “God wills the good, because it is good” is “the shallow, rationalistic one, in that it behaves ‘as though’ that which is good could be given some further foundation”.<sup>[60]</sup> Today, divine command theory is defended by many philosophers of religion, though typically in a restricted form (see below).

## *Criticisms*

This horn of the dilemma also faces several problems:

- No reasons for morality: If there is no moral standard other than God’s will, then God’s commands are arbitrary (i.e., based on pure whimsy or caprice). This would mean that morality is ultimately not based on reasons: “if theological voluntarism is true, then God’s commands/intentions must be arbitrary; [but] it cannot be that morality could wholly depend on something arbitrary... [for] when we say that some moral state of affairs obtains, we take it that there is a reason for that moral state of affairs obtaining rather than another.”<sup>[61]</sup> And as [Michael J. Murray](#) and [Michael Rea](#) put it, this would also “cas[t] doubt on the notion that morality is genuinely objective.”<sup>[62]</sup> An

additional problem is that it is difficult to explain how true moral actions can exist if one acts only out of fear of God or in an attempt to be rewarded by him.<sup>[63]</sup>

- No reasons for God: This arbitrariness would also jeopardize God's status as a [wise](#) and [rational](#) being, one who always acts on good reasons. As Leibniz writes: "Where will be his justice and his wisdom if he has only a certain despotic power, if arbitrary will takes the place of reasonableness, and if in accord with the definition of tyrants, justice consists in that which is pleasing to the most powerful? Besides it seems that every act of willing supposes some reason for the willing and this reason, of course, must precede the act."<sup>[64]</sup>
- Anything goes:<sup>[65]</sup> This arbitrariness would also mean that *anything* could become good, and *anything* could become bad, merely upon God's command. Thus if God commanded us "to gratuitously inflict pain on each other"<sup>[66]</sup> or to engage in "cruelty for its own sake"<sup>[67]</sup> or to hold an "annual sacrifice of randomly selected ten-year-olds in a particularly gruesome ritual that involves excruciating and prolonged suffering for its victims",<sup>[68]</sup> then we would be morally obligated to do so. As 17th-century philosopher [Ralph Cudworth](#) put it: "nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that hypothesis forthwith become holy, just, and righteous."<sup>[69]</sup>
- Moral [contingency](#): If morality depends on the [perfectly free will](#) of God, morality would lose its necessity: "If nothing prevents God from loving things that are different from what God actually loves, then goodness can change [from world to world](#) or time to time. This is obviously objectionable to those who believe that claims about morality are, if true, necessarily true."<sup>[65]</sup> In other words, no action is necessarily moral: any right action could have easily been wrong, if God had so decided, and an action which is right today could easily become wrong tomorrow, if God so decides. Indeed, some have

argued that divine command theory is incompatible with ordinary conceptions of moral [supervenience](#).<sup>[70]</sup>

- Why do God's commands obligate?: Mere commands do not create obligations unless the commander has some commanding authority. But this commanding authority cannot itself be based on those very commands (i.e., a command to obey commands), otherwise a vicious circle results. So, in order for God's commands to obligate us, he must derive commanding authority from some source other than his own will. As Cudworth put it: "For it was never heard of, that any one founded all his authority of commanding others, and others [[sic](#)] obligation or duty to obey his commands, in a law of his own making, that men should be required, obliged, or bound to obey him. Wherefore since the thing willed in all laws is not that men should be bound or obliged to obey; this thing cannot be the product of the meer [[sic](#)] will of the commander, but it must proceed from something else; namely, the right or authority of the commander."<sup>[71]</sup> To avoid the circle, one might say our obligation comes from gratitude to God for creating us. But this presupposes some sort of independent moral standard obligating us to be grateful to our benefactors. As 18th-century philosopher [Francis Hutcheson](#) writes: "Is the Reason exciting to concur with the Deity this, 'The Deity is our Benefactor?' Then what Reason excites to concur with Benefactors?"<sup>[72]</sup> Or finally, one might resort to [Hobbes](#)'s view: "The right of nature whereby God reigneth over men, and punisheth those that break his laws, is to be derived, not from his creating them (as if he required obedience, as of gratitude for his benefits), but from his *irresistible power*."<sup>[73]</sup> In other words, [might makes right](#).
- God's goodness: If *all* goodness is a matter of God's will, then what shall become of God's goodness? Thus [William P. Alston](#) writes, "since the standards of moral goodness are set by divine commands, to say that God is morally good is just to say that he obeys his own commands... that God practises what he

preaches, whatever that might be;”<sup>[66]</sup> Hutcheson deems such a view “an insignificant [tautology](#), amounting to no more than this, “That God wills what he wills.”<sup>[74]</sup> Alternatively, as Leibniz puts it, divine command theorists “deprive God of the designation *good*: for what cause could one have to praise him for what he does, if in doing something quite different he would have done equally well?”<sup>[75]</sup> A related point is raised by [C. S. Lewis](#): “if good is to be *defined* as what God commands, then the goodness of God Himself is emptied of meaning and the commands of an omnipotent fiend would have the same claim on us as those of the ‘righteous Lord.’”<sup>[76]</sup> Or again Leibniz: “this opinion would hardly distinguish God from the devil.”<sup>[77]</sup> That is, since divine command theory trivializes God’s goodness, it is incapable of explaining the difference between God and an all-powerful demon.

- The [is-ought problem](#) and the [naturalistic fallacy](#): According to [David Hume](#), it is hard to see how moral propositions featuring the relation *ought* could ever be deduced from ordinary is propositions, such as “the being of a God.”<sup>[78]</sup> Divine command theory is thus guilty of deducing moral *oughts* from ordinary ises about God’s commands.<sup>[79]</sup> In a similar vein, [G. E. Moore](#) argued (with his [open question argument](#)) that the notion *good* is indefinable, and any attempts to analyze it in [naturalistic](#) or [metaphysical](#) terms are guilty of the so-called “naturalistic fallacy.”<sup>[80]</sup> This would block any theory which analyzes morality in terms of God’s will: and indeed, in a later discussion of divine command theory, Moore concluded that “when we assert any action to be right or wrong, we are not merely making an assertion about the attitude of mind towards it of any being or set of beings whatever.”<sup>[81]</sup>
- No morality without God: If all morality is a matter of God’s will, then if God does not exist, there is no morality. This is the thought captured in the slogan ([often attributed to Dostoevsky](#)) “[If God does not exist, everything is permitted.](#)” Divine command theorists disagree over whether this is a

problem for their view or a virtue of their view. [Many argue](#) that morality does indeed require God's existence, and that this is in fact a problem for atheism. But divine command theorist [Robert Merrihew Adams](#) contends that this idea ("that no actions would be ethically wrong if there were not a loving God") is one that "will seem (at least initially) implausible to many", and that his theory must "dispel [an] air of paradox."[\[82\]](#)

### *Restricted divine command theory*

One common response to the Euthyphro dilemma centers on a distinction between *value* and *obligation*. Obligation, which concerns rightness and wrongness (or what is required, forbidden, or permissible), is given a voluntarist treatment. But value, which concerns goodness and badness, is treated as independent of divine commands. The result is a *restricted* divine command theory that applies only to a specific region of morality: the [deontic](#) region of obligation. This response is found in [Francisco Suárez's](#) discussion of natural law and voluntarism in *De legibus*[\[83\]](#) and has been prominent in contemporary philosophy of religion, appearing in the work of Robert M. Adams,[\[84\]](#) [Philip L. Quinn](#),[\[85\]](#) and William P. Alston.[\[86\]](#)

A significant attraction of such a view is that, since it allows for a non-voluntarist treatment of goodness and badness, and therefore of God's own moral attributes, some of the aforementioned problems with voluntarism can perhaps be answered. God's commands are not arbitrary: there are reasons which guide his commands based ultimately on this goodness and badness.[\[87\]](#) God could not issue horrible commands: God's own essential goodness[\[79\]\[88\]\[89\]](#) or loving character[\[90\]](#) would keep him from issuing any unsuitable commands. Our obligation to obey God's commands does not result in circular reasoning; it might instead be based on a gratitude whose appropriateness is itself independent of divine commands.[\[91\]](#) These proposed solutions are

controversial,<sup>[92]</sup> and some steer the view back into problems associated with the first horn.<sup>[93]</sup>

One problem remains for such views: if God's own essential goodness does not depend on divine commands, then on what *does* it depend? Something other than God? Here the restricted divine command theory is commonly combined with a view reminiscent of Plato: God is identical to the ultimate standard for goodness.<sup>[94]</sup> Alston offers the analogy of [the standard meter bar in France](#). Something is a meter long inasmuch as it is the same length as the standard meter bar, and likewise, something is good inasmuch as it approximates God. If one asks why God is identified as the ultimate standard for goodness, Alston replies that this is "the end of the line," with no further explanation available, but adds that this is no more arbitrary than a view that invokes a fundamental moral standard.<sup>[95]</sup> On this view, then, even though goodness is independent of God's *will*, it still depends on *God*, and thus God's sovereignty remains intact.

This solution has been criticized by [Wes Morriston](#). If we identify the ultimate standard for goodness with God's nature, then it seems we are identifying it with certain properties of God (e.g., being loving, being just). If so, then the dilemma resurfaces: is God good because he has those properties, or are those properties good because God has them?<sup>[96]</sup> Nevertheless, Morriston concludes that the appeal to God's essential goodness is the divine-command theorist's best bet. To produce a satisfying result, however, it would have to give an account of God's goodness that does not trivialize it and does not make God subject to an independent standard of goodness.<sup>[97]</sup>

Moral philosopher [Peter Singer](#), disputing the perspective that "God is good" and could never advocate something like torture, states that those who propose this are "caught in a trap of their own making, for what can they possibly mean by the assertion that God is good? That God is approved of by God?"<sup>[98]</sup>

## False dilemma

[Augustine](#), [Anselm](#), and Aquinas all wrote about the issues raised by the Euthyphro dilemma, although, like [William James](#)<sup>[99]</sup> and Wittgenstein<sup>[60]</sup> later, they did not mention it by name. As philosopher and Anselm scholar Katherin A. Rogers observes, many contemporary philosophers of religion suppose that there are true propositions which exist as platonic [abstracta](#) independently of God.<sup>[100]</sup> Among these are propositions constituting a moral order, to which God must conform in order to be good.<sup>[101]</sup> Classical [Judaeo-Christian](#) theism, however, rejects such a view as inconsistent with God's omnipotence, which requires that God and what he has made is all that there is.<sup>[100]</sup> "The classical tradition," Rogers notes, "also steers clear of the other horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, divine command theory."<sup>[102]</sup> From a classical theistic perspective, therefore, the Euthyphro dilemma is false. As Rogers puts it, "Anselm, like Augustine before him and Aquinas later, rejects both horns of the Euthyphro dilemma. God neither conforms to nor invents the moral order. Rather His very nature is the standard for value."<sup>[100]</sup>

### *Jewish thought*

The basis of the false dilemma response—God's nature is the standard for value—predates the dilemma itself, appearing first in the thought of the eighth-century BC [Hebrew prophets](#), [Amos](#), [Hosea](#), [Micah](#) and [Isaiah](#). (Amos lived some three centuries before Socrates and two before [Thales](#), traditionally regarded as the first Greek philosopher.) "Their message," writes British scholar [Norman H. Snaith](#), "is recognized by all as marking a considerable advance on all previous ideas,"<sup>[103]</sup> not least in its "special consideration for the poor and down-trodden."<sup>[104]</sup> As Snaith observes, *tsedeq*, the Hebrew word for [righteousness](#), "actually stands for the establishment of

God's will in the land." This includes justice, but goes beyond it, "because God's will is wider than justice. He has a particular regard for the helpless ones on earth."<sup>[105]</sup> *Tsedeq* "is the norm by which all must be judged" and it "depends entirely upon the Nature of God."<sup>[106]</sup>

Hebrew has few [abstract nouns](#). What the Greeks thought of as ideas or abstractions, the Hebrews thought of as activities.<sup>[107]</sup> In contrast to the Greek [dikaiousune](#) (justice) of the philosophers, *tsedeq* is not an idea abstracted from this world of affairs. As Snaith writes:

*Tsedeq* is something that happens here, and can be seen, and recognized, and known. It follows, therefore, that when the Hebrew thought of *tsedeq* (righteousness), he did not think of Righteousness in general, or of Righteousness as an Idea. On the contrary, he thought of a particular righteous act, an action, concrete, capable of exact description, fixed in time and space.... If the word had anything like a general meaning for him, then it was as it was represented by a whole series of events, the sum-total of a number of particular happenings.<sup>[106]</sup>

The Hebrew stance on what came to be called the [problem of universals](#), as on much else, was very different from that of Plato and precluded anything like the Euthyphro dilemma.<sup>[108]</sup> This has not changed. In 2005, [Jonathan Sacks](#) wrote, "In Judaism, the Euthyphro dilemma does not exist."<sup>[109]</sup> Jewish philosophers Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman criticized the Euthyphro dilemma as "misleading" because "it is not exhaustive": it leaves out a third option, namely that God "acts only out of His nature."<sup>[110]</sup>

### *St. Thomas Aquinas*

Like [Aristotle](#), Aquinas rejected Platonism.<sup>[111]</sup> In his view, to speak of abstractions not only as existent, but as more perfect exemplars



than fully designated particulars, is to put a premium on generality and vagueness.<sup>[112]</sup> On this analysis, the abstract “good” in the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma is an unnecessary obfuscation. Aquinas frequently quoted with approval Aristotle’s definition, “Good is what all desire.”<sup>[113][114]</sup> As he clarified, “When we say that good is what all desire, it is not to be understood that every kind of good thing is desired by all, but that whatever is desired has the nature of good.”<sup>[115]</sup> In other words, even those who desire evil desire it “only under the aspect of good,” i.e., of what is desirable.<sup>[116]</sup> The difference between desiring good and desiring evil is that in the former, will and reason are in harmony, whereas in the latter, they are in discord.<sup>[117]</sup>

Aquinas’s discussion of [sin](#) provides a good point of entry to his philosophical explanation of why the nature of God is the standard for value. “Every sin,” he writes, “consists in the longing for a passing [i.e., ultimately unreal or false] good.”<sup>[118]</sup> Thus, “in a certain sense it is true what Socrates says, namely that no one sins with full knowledge.”<sup>[119]</sup> “No sin in the will happens without an ignorance of the understanding.”<sup>[120]</sup> God, however, has full knowledge ([omniscience](#)) and therefore by definition (that of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as well as Aquinas) can never will anything other than what is good. It has been claimed – for instance, by [Nicolai Hartmann](#), who wrote: “There is no freedom for the good that would not be at the same time freedom for evil”<sup>[121]</sup> – that this would limit God’s freedom, and therefore his omnipotence. [Josef Pieper](#), however, replies that such arguments rest upon an impermissibly [anthropomorphic](#) conception of God.<sup>[122]</sup> In the case of humans, as Aquinas says, to be able to sin is indeed a consequence,<sup>[123]</sup> or even a sign, of freedom (*quodam libertatis signum*).<sup>[124]</sup> Humans, in other words, are not puppets manipulated by God so that they always do what is right. However, “it does not belong to the [essence](#) of the free will to be able to decide for evil.”<sup>[125]</sup> “To will evil is neither freedom nor a part of freedom.”<sup>[124]</sup> It is precisely humans’ creatureliness – that is, their not being God and therefore omniscient – that makes them capable of sinning.<sup>[126]</sup> Consequently, writes Pieper, “the

inability to sin should be looked on as the very signature of a higher freedom – contrary to the usual way of conceiving the issue.”<sup>[122]</sup> Pieper concludes: “Only *the* will [i.e., God’s] can be the right standard of its own willing and must will what is right necessarily, from within itself, and always. A deviation from the norm would not even be thinkable. And obviously only the absolute divine will is the right standard of its own act”<sup>[127][128]</sup> – and consequently of all human acts. Thus the second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, divine command theory, is also disposed of.

### *William James*

William James, in his essay “[The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life](#)“, dismisses the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma and stays clear of the second. He writes: “Our ordinary attitude of regarding ourselves as subject to an overarching system of moral relations, true ‘in themselves,’ is ... either an out-and-out superstition, or else it must be treated as a merely provisional abstraction from that real Thinker ... to whom the existence of the universe is due.”<sup>[129]</sup> Moral obligations are created by “personal demands,” whether these demands<sup>[130]</sup> come from the weakest creatures, from the most insignificant persons, or from God. It follows that “ethics have as genuine a foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well.” However, whether “the purely human system” works “as well as the other is a different question.”<sup>[129]</sup>

For James, the deepest practical difference in the moral life is between what he calls “the easy-going and the strenuous mood.”<sup>[131]</sup> In a purely human moral system, it is hard to rise above the easy-going mood, since the thinker’s “various ideals, known to him to be mere preferences of his own, are too nearly of the same denominational value;”<sup>[132]</sup> he can play fast and loose with them at will. This too is why, in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximum stimulating

power.” Our attitude is “entirely different” in a world where there are none but “finite demanders” from that in a world where there is also “an infinite demander.” This is because “the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands”, for in that case, “actualized in his thought already must be that ethical philosophy which we seek as the pattern which our own must evermore approach.” Even though “exactly what the thought of this infinite thinker may be is hidden from us”, our postulation of him serves “to let loose in us the strenuous mood”<sup>[131]</sup> and confront us with an [existential](#)<sup>[133]</sup> “challenge” in which “our total character and personal genius ... are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life. From this unsparing practical ordeal no professor’s lectures and no array of books can save us.”<sup>[131]</sup> In the words of Richard M. Gale, “God inspires us to lead the morally strenuous life in virtue of our conceiving of him as unsurpassably good. This supplies James with an adequate answer to the underlying question of the *Euthyphro*.”<sup>[134]</sup>

### *Atheistic resolutions*

[Atheism](#) challenges the assumption of the dilemma that God exists (or in the original formulation, that the many gods in Greek religion existed). This eliminates the need to decide whether God is either non-omniscient or arbitrary, and also eliminates the possibility of God as the source of morality.

[Secular humanism](#) takes the positive stance that morality is not dependent on religion or theology, and that ethical rules should be developed based on reason, science, experience, debate, and democracy. Some secular humanists believe in [ethical naturalism](#), that there are objective, discoverable laws of morality inherent to the human condition, of which humans may have imperfect

knowledge. Others have adopted [moral relativism](#) in the sense of [meta-ethics](#) – the idea that ethics are a [social construct](#) – but nonetheless by way of [utilitarianism](#) advocate imposing a set of [universal ethics](#) and laws that create the type of society in which they wish to live, where people are safe, prosperous, and happy. These competing resolutions represent different answers to a question similar to the original dilemma: “Is something inherently ethical or unethical, or is something ethical or unethical because a person or society says it is so?”

### *Rejection of universal morality*

The other assumption of the dilemma is that there is a universal right and wrong, against which a god either creates or is defined by. [Moral nihilism](#) challenges that assumption by rejecting the concept of morality entirely. This conflicts with the teachings of most religions (and thus is usually accompanied by atheism) but is theoretically compatible with the notion of a powerful God or gods who have opinions about how people should behave.

[Moral relativism](#) accepts the idea of morality, but asserts that there are multiple potential arbiters of moral truth. This opens the possibility of disagreeing with God about the rules of ethics, and of creating multiple societies with different, equally valid sets of ethics (just as different countries have different sets of laws). “Normative moral relativism” asserts that behavior based on alternative systems of morality should be tolerated. In the context of [religious pluralism](#), strong [relativism](#) it also opens the possibility that different gods and different belief systems produce different but equally valid moral systems, which may apply only to adherents of those faiths.

## In popular culture

In the song “[No Church in the Wild](#)” from the album [Watch the Throne](#), rapper [Jay Z](#) references the dilemma with the line, “Is pious pious ‘cause God loves pious? [Socrates](#) asked whose bias do y’all seek.”<sup>[135]</sup>

## In American legal thinking

[Yale Law School](#) Professor [Myres S. McDougal](#), formerly a classicist, later a scholar of property law, posed the question, “Do we protect it because it’s a property right, or is it a property right because we protect it?”<sup>[136]</sup>

Subsequently, in [United States v. Willow River Power Co.](#), 324 U.S. 499 (1945), Justice [Robert H. Jackson](#) addressed whether there was a protectable property interest in a head of water lessened by federal action. He stated:

[N]ot all economic interests are “property rights;” only those economic advantages are “rights” which have the law back of them, and only when they are so recognized may courts compel others to forbear from interfering with them or to compensate for their invasion. ... We cannot start the process of decision by calling such a claim as we have here a “property right;” whether it is a property right is really the question to be answered. Such economic uses are rights only when they are legally protected interests.<sup>[137]</sup>

The Court’s majority (per Justice Jackson) resolved its version of the Euthyphro dilemma by ruling that property rights exist if courts recognize and protect them, rather than holding that property rights pre-exist and courts merely perceive them. A dissenting opinion, however, considered that property rights existed *a priori*

and that they dictated the conclusion that courts should (therefore) enforce them.

PART II

# CHAPTER 2: ETHICAL JUDGMENT





# 14. What is Ethical Judgement?



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here: <https://library.achievingthedream.org/epccintroethics1/?p=32>

Ethics is concerned with the kind of people we are, but also with the things we do or fail to do. This could be called the “ethics of doing.” Some people, however, don’t take the time to consider the ethical dimensions of given situations before they act. This may happen because they have not gathered all of the necessary information needed, while others might rationalize excuses, employ defense mechanisms, or incorrectly gauge the intensity of the situation.

A well-known joke shared regularly when many of us were growing up asks, “How do you clean Dracula’s teeth?” The response is very simple: “Very carefully.” When we think about the question, “How do we make ethical decisions in our modern world?” the response to this childhood joke seems very appropriate here as well. Unfortunately, we live in an time where many important situations are not thought through carefully, and too often, are responded to impulsively.

We need to help students realize that in order to know what to do in a given situation, they should explore issues carefully—gathering all the relevant facts, considering the actions involved, and evaluating the potential consequences. Once they have clarified

these points, their personal values can guide them in making a final decision. This is the process and basis for what we can call “ethical judgment.”

Judgment on an ethical issue will usually depend on two things: values and priorities.

Values are the things that we hold important for our sense of who we are. They are expressed in statements such as “human life and dignity should be protected,” or “cheating is wrong.” They develop over time and are influenced by family, religion, education, peers and a whole range of experiences, both good and bad, that have helped shape us.

In some situations, even people who agree on the same values, will disagree on the decision because a particular situation brings different values into conflict. This will require people to prioritize their values. It is sometimes referred to as an “ethical dilemma,” where there does not seem to be any solution without compromising one’s values, or where one’s decision may have negative consequences.

This was famously demonstrated by social psychologist Stanley Milgram, whose research experiment exposed how external social forces, even the most subtle, have surprisingly powerful effects on our behavior and our ethical judgment.

Milgram created an electric ‘shock generator’ with 30 switches. The switch was marked clearly in 15-volt increments, ranging from 15 to 450 volts. The “shock generator” was in fact phony and would only produce sound when the switches were pressed. 40 subjects (males) were recruited via mail and a newspaper ad. They thought they were going to participate in an experiment about memory and learning. In the test, each subject was informed clearly that their payment was for showing up, and they could keep the payment regardless of what happened after they arrived.

Next, the subject met an “experimenter,” the person leading the experiment, and another person told to be another subject. The other subject was in fact a confederate to the experiment, only acting as a subject. The two subjects drew slips of paper to indicate

who was going to be a “teacher” and who was going to be a “learner.” The lottery was in fact a set-up, and the real subject would always get the role of the teacher.

The teacher saw that the learner was strapped to a chair and electrodes were attached. The subject was then seated in another room in front of the shock generator, unable to see the learner. The subject was then instructed to “teach” word-pairs to the learner. When the learner made a mistake, the subject was instructed to punish the learner by giving him a shock, 15 volts higher for each mistake. The “learner,” kept in mind, never received the shocks, but pre-taped audio was triggered when a shock-switch was pressed.

If the experimenter, seated in the same room, was contacted, the experimenter would answer with predefined prodding such as “Please continue,” “Please go on,” “The experiment requires that you go on,” “It is absolutely essential that you continue,” “You have no other choice, you must go on.” If the subject asked who was responsible if anything would happen to the learner, the experimenter answered “I am responsible.” This gave the subject a relief and many continued with the process of administering shocks.

Although most subjects were uncomfortable doing it, all 40 subjects obeyed up to 300 volts. 25 of the 40 subjects continued to complete to give shocks until the maximum level of 450 volts was reached.

So what happened to each participant’s ethical judgment?

While we would like to believe that when confronted with ethical dilemmas we will all act in the best possible way, Milgram’s experiment revealed that in a concrete situation with powerful social constraints, ethical systems can be compromised. This experiment also shows us the necessity for people to improve their ethical judgment.

## 15. Rationalization as Excuse

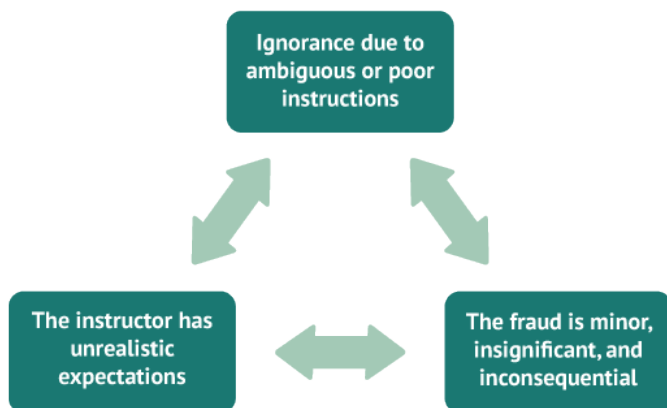


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here: <https://library.achievingthedream.org/epccintroethics1/?p=33>

One of the biggest challenges with integrating ethics is overcoming “simplistic subjectivism,” or the belief that “ethics is simply a matter of personal opinion, that there is nothing anyone can say or do to change a person’s mind about ethical issues,” and that there is something wrong with trying to change people’s minds—because people should have the right to their own opinion (Matchett, 2009, p.1). This process of rationalization embraces the grey areas found ethics, and can be used as an excuse to avoid, and in some cases, justify, judgments, decision-making, and ultimately action. Let’s consider for a moment, the rising problem of academic dishonesty in higher education.

A recent study from Rutgers University showed that 62% of all university students admitted to cheating during the course of their matriculation. Statistics like this are not the exception anymore, but rather are quickly becoming the norm. In general, students do not enter the University with the intent of cheating throughout one’s academic career. When it does happen, some common, almost cyclical, rationalizations faculty will hear include:



Academic integrity is an issue in both face-to-face and online learning environments. We do know there are strategies to combat rationalizations used as an excuse, particularly by reducing ambiguity and grey areas as much as possible including:

- Developing some type of personal relationship with students (even on small scales). Research has shown that it does impact students' decisions to act ethically.
- Making every effort to clearly design their curriculum and outline all the resources that are approved for use, rather than trying to identify the infinite list of resources that are prohibited.
- Emphasizing that all methods of cheating are subject to review, and this should combat the notion of any student having advantage over another.
- Recognizing that it is impossible to eliminate all methods of cheating. The best way to avoid academic dishonesty is to create strong disincentives to cheat, and to create an environment (or course content) where students will find it more difficult to rationalize cheating.

This is not to say that the onus of responsibility to prevent academic dishonesty is only on the faculty member, but it doesn't

hurt to be more proactive and take steps beyond a policy on a syllabus.

### **Fostering Ethical Writing**

The news has been filled in recent years with stories about unethical writers, people who have been caught using other writers' words and ideas without citing the source. In the academic world, such borrowing is a serious breach of ethics, with serious consequences. One university president, who borrowed too freely in a convocation speech without mentioning his source, was forced to resign his position. Recently, some history professors' books were found to contain long passages taken verbatim from sources, the result—they claimed—of careless note taking. Whether deliberate or accidental, such mistakes can destroy a person's career.

With the advent of the internet and the easy availability of materials and content, students can quickly rationalize academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, by using reasoning such as "They had the same idea as me—and they said it better!" Students may also plagiarize less deliberately, not realizing that material that is so easy to copy and paste from the Web must be treated as a quotation and cited as a source. Students need to know the consequences of plagiarizing are severe, ranging from failure on the writing project to failure in the course and even to suspension or expulsion from the university. Many universities will also indicate on a student's transcript if there has been an honor violation, something potential employers will see.

### *Exercise*

Can you think of famous examples of plagiarism?

\*Here is a start: Look up plagiarism incidents involving Jayson Blair, Shia LaBeouf, or Kaavya Viswanathan.

# 16. Defense Mechanisms



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A **major obstacle** to developing effective ethical judgment is called “defense mechanisms.” Sigmund Freud popularized the concept of human defense mechanisms when he introduced his personality model—the id, ego and superego. The ego deals with reality, attempting to reconcile the conflicting demands of the id and superego. The id seeks to fulfill wants, needs and impulses, while the superego seeks to act in an idealistic and moral manner. While modern research does not focus on Freud’s theories the same way he presented them, the concept of defense mechanisms remains as a viable way to understand human behavior and, in our context here, as a challenge to ethical judgment.

Defense mechanisms are sometimes created to shield us from the conflict between what we want instinctually and the standards of behavior that have been established. In an attempt to protect ourselves, and sometimes coupled with rationalization, can be used to distort the choices we make. Defense mechanisms filter out an alternate reality in favor of the reality that the mind prefers—they can falsify, twist, or deny reality. Denial is an open rejection of an obvious truth. By simply denying that the problem, affliction or ailment exists, the person does not have to deal with it.

Denial as a defense mechanism has become especially evident with the judgment students are making regarding alcohol



consumption and binge drinking. Despite best efforts, overdoses involving alcohol alone rose 25% since 2008 in college populations (NIH, 2014).

The first step to helping students have better judgment towards consuming alcohol involves the rejection of denial; we cannot deny that many college students will drink, and virtually all of them will experience the effects of college drinking. Here are the current facts about college drinking from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. We know that:

- 1,825 college students die every year from alcohol-related injuries.
- 690,000 students are assaulted by someone who has been drinking.
- 97,000 of those are alcohol-related sexual assaults or rape.
- 25% of college students report academic consequences of alcohol abuse.
- 1.5% of college students report trying to commit suicide due to drinking or drug use issues

# 17. What Should You Do?



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One of the things that makes it tricky to have effective ethical judgment is that every ethical dilemma is different. Academics who study ethics have come up with the term “ethical intensity” as a way to describe the various dimensions along which dilemmas can differ; each one will affect what type of judgment a person makes. The bigger the consequences, for example, or how much consensus a person has to support an action, will determine the intensity surrounding a judgment. How much that intensity increases or decreases can change the type of judgment made.

One way to gauge ethical intensity is by considering if the harm or benefit predicted will result if a decision is implemented. A consequence with a low probability of happening is less intense. Whether the consequences will occur immediately or in the future will also effect how much intensity is involved—we tend to discount future events as somehow less real, decreasing the intensity.

Proximity plays a big role in how intense a dilemma is. A decision that will affect our family is more intense than one that will affect strangers. And finally, how many people will be affected by a decision can change the intensity of a situation. A judgment that could benefit many people is more intense than one that has fewer beneficiaries.

## **Creating an Ethical Online Environment**

One growing area where the intensity of situations can escalate very quickly is in the online environment. From discussion forums, social media feeds, to comment boards, people use the perceived anonymity of being online to hurt, discredit, and disparage others. Because the intensity of the platform or the dialogue has not been properly considered, messages are sometimes exchanged or posted with little regard to the anxiety, distress or harm a person can cause, and our judgment in how to respond can become blurred and difficult to resolve as well.

**“Flaming” or “Trolling” are terms given for** hostile and insulting interaction between internet users. It frequently results from discussions about polarizing issues, but can it also be provoked by seemingly trivial differences. Deliberate flaming or trolling involves posting inflammatory messages in an online community with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response that disrupts productive, on-topic, discussion.

Unfortunately, this is not relegated to social media or online environments outside of the university. Online learning opportunities are expanding rapidly in higher education, and learning management systems are widely utilized to deliver class content, and foster the exchange of ideas through discussion boards and e-mail. The “appropriateness” of interactions found on discussion boards and e-mail exchanges between students and faculty, and students with other students can be quite subjective, and if not monitored, can easily escalate the intensity of the environment. This is made more difficult in classes where the content may include provocative or controversial topics.

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Although we may all strive to behave ethically, a gap often exists between the ideal outcome and what can realistically be accomplished. We acknowledge up front that ethical perfection lies beyond reach for virtually all of us humans, even if we could

completely agree on the ethically correct response in every situation. And, unfortunately, good intentions may prove insufficient to ensure that wrongs will not occur. An effective response requires developed skills, planned resources, the right information, and a keen ethical and self-awareness.

It seems fitting to quickly review underlying values and virtues that should guide ethical judgment and the issues we raised in this chapter:

- **Do No Harm:** We should work to ensure that the potential for damage is eliminated or at least minimized to the greatest extent possible.

- **Respect:** Individuals have the right to decide how to live their lives so long as their actions do not interfere with the rights and welfare of others.

- **Dignity:** We must strive to understand cultural, gender, economic diversity and other ways that people differ from ourselves and endeavor to eliminate biases that might influence our judgment.

- **Excellence:** Maintaining competence, doing our best, and taking pride in our work form the foundation of academia.

- **Be Courageous:** The truth is that it often takes a strong backbone to actively uphold ethical principles, especially when one observes unethical actions perpetrated by others.

PART III

# CHAPTER 3: MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS



# 18. Taking Action



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Standing up for ethical values takes courage. A police officer may courageously run into harm's way because he or she is protecting life and property. Part of this courage will come from the duty of the job and to the community, but the rest comes from something far deeper as part of their character. Although most ethical dilemmas aren't a matter of life and death, standing up to protect ethical standards can necessitate just as much courage, and be just as noble.

Simply being offended by ethical wrongdoing is not enough. Courage comes in taking action. It is about setting aside fear and acting for the common good of yourself and others. Ethics without the component of courage to take action, will keep it in the realm of the conceptual, rather than in actual practice.

Why would we be afraid of acting ethically though? Fear may be caused by knowing that our actions might face retribution, disapproval, or conflict. Fear may also be caused by simply not knowing what the outcome will be.

Apathy, however, may be one of the biggest reasons people don't act when they see something ethically wrong. In fact, apathy can get worse when we are in a crowd of people—we actually are less likely to help others, or speak out against ethical transgressions when we

are in groups. Though perplexing, this form of apathy, known as the “bystander effect,” is common.

The most frequently cited example of the bystander effect is the story of the brutal murder of Catherine “Kitty” Genovese. On Friday, March 13, 1964, 28-year-old Genovese was returning home from work. As she approached her apartment entrance, she was attacked and stabbed by a man later identified as Winston Moseley.

Despite Genovese’s repeated calls for help, none of the dozen or so people in the nearby apartment building who heard her cries called police to report the incident. The attack first began at 3:20 AM, but it was not until 3:50 AM that someone first contacted police. While Genovese’s case has been subject to numerous misrepresentations and inaccuracies, it still serves as a parable to understand how the bystander effect can clearly have a powerful impact on social behavior.

Unfortunately, there have been numerous other cases. In 2015, a video capturing a sexual assault on a crowded Florida beach during Spring Break surfaced. The video was taken for unrelated reasons, but showed four men allegedly assaulting a woman who appeared to be unconscious. The woman did not remember the assault, but she recognized herself when reporters played the video on the news. She contacted the authorities, and told them she recalled drinking out of another person’s water bottle that day. It is likely the woman was drugged by contents in the drink and was then assaulted.

Why didn’t one of the hundreds of bystanders step in to help the victim?

Perhaps some bystanders didn’t realize that a sexual assault was happening, as many were drinking heavily themselves, clouding their ethical judgment. Social psychology, however, can offer two strong reasons to explain this bystander apathy.

First is called the “diffusion of responsibility.” This occurs when other people think that another person will intervene and, as a result, they feel less responsible. Because there are other observers, individuals do not feel as much pressure to take action, since the responsibility to take action is thought to be shared among all of



those present. So if one person doesn't take action, no one in the group will either.

The second explanation is called "pluralistic ignorance." This refers to the mentality that since everyone else is not reacting to a situation, it must not be serious. The "wisdom of the crowd" notes the inaction of others and will draw the erroneous conclusion that everything is fine.

How can we help our students from falling into this trap of inaction?

Bystanders inevitably go through a process of understanding what they are witnessing. And at any point, they can decide to do something... or nothing.

When faced with a situation that requires action, understanding how apathy might be holding us back and consciously taking steps to overcome it, can break the cycle.

# 19. Accountability



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Remember how you felt as a kid when an adult told you to say you were sorry? Maybe you took something you weren't supposed to, or were just generally not behaving like the good kid everyone knew you to be. We would venture to guess that the worse part of the whole experience was not necessarily getting in trouble, or having your games taken away, but more so, it was having to make that verbal, public concession that you had done something wrong.

The end goal for ethics is to take action, ideally implemented with the greatest care to all involved. However, that doesn't always occur. Ethical accountability, then, is the readiness to take responsibility for actions taken. This is also not easy. How often do we hear things like "I'm sorry, **BUT**..." –adding the presence of some factor that has undermined control of a situation. Contrition is typically followed by some sort of statement explaining it away, and for some, that distaste for saying "I'm sorry" has never gone away.

In addition, there are some common rationalizations that are used to avoid accountability:

**If it's necessary, it's ethical:** This reasoning often leads to ends-justify-the-means rationale and treating non-ethical tasks as ethical imperatives.

**If it's legal, it's ethical:** This reasoning substitutes personal ethical judgment for legal requirements.

**If you did it to me first and I do it back to you, it's ethical:** This

reasoning often leads to the eye-for-an-eye argument. Retaliatory in nature.

**If everyone's doing it, it's ethical:** This reasoning didn't work with our parents, but for some reason it keeps making a comeback, using cultural, organizational, or occupational behaviors and customs as ethical norms.

And then there is, perhaps, the most infamous rationalization: **"I was just doing my job."**

People have been able to compartmentalize ethics into personal and job-related, and may often feel justified doing things at work that they know to be wrong in other contexts. Because of this, accountability is lost.

Nowhere has this been most problematically witnessed than at the 1961 trial for Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal who was indicted on 15 criminal charges, including crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against the Jewish people, and membership in a criminal organization.

In his testimony throughout the trial, Eichmann insisted he had no choice but to follow orders, as he was bound by an oath of loyalty—the defense used by some defendants in the 1945–1946 Nuremberg trials. Eichmann asserted that the decisions had been made not by him, but rather his superiors.

Eichmann did not seem to realize the enormity of his crimes and showed no remorse. As a clear decision to exterminate had been made by his superiors; he felt absolved of any guilt. He was found guilty of his war crimes, and when considering the sentence, the judges concluded that Eichmann had not merely been following orders, but believed in the Nazi cause wholeheartedly and had been a key perpetrator of the genocide. There was no admission of personal guilt from Eichmann at any point.

Other Nazi war criminals who were found and tried provided similar reasoning for perpetuating their acts of violence. In 2009, Heinrich Boere, who murdered Dutch civilians as part of a Nazi Waffen SS hit squad during World War (and avoided justice for six decades), died in a prison hospital while serving a life sentence. He

also remained unapologetic to the end for his actions, saying that he had been proud to volunteer for the SS, and that times were different then.

Ultimately, these rationales demonstrate that accountability frameworks are needed, but cannot replace individual judgment. Ethics needs standards, but they can't be followed in a mechanical way. Each person must have their own stable set of core values with the integrity to take responsibility for his or her own judgment and choices, even in a turbulent, ever-changing environment.

## 20. Real Life Ethical Scenarios

Let's explore different ethical scenarios and consider the question again, of what would you do?

### 1. Fast food dilemma:



You are an employee at a fast-food restaurant in charge of the grill. It's busy today, and a lot of orders are coming in fast. In the process of cooking, you drop a hamburger patty on the floor. Your manager is passing by and says "Just pick it up and serve it." What would you do?

### 2. Easy A?



You have a research paper due in a few days for your English class. If you don't do well in this class, your financial aid will be compromised—you can not afford school otherwise. A friend tells

you about a website that creates custom papers for a small fee. You are guaranteed an “A” on the essay, and guaranteed you won’t be caught. What would you do?

**3. Too much alcohol:**



You are at a party with all of your friends and everyone is having a great time. You notice that one of your underage friends has had too much to drink and is on the verge of passing out. What would you do?

**4. Loyalty or honesty?**



Your friend tells you in the strictest confidence that she is cheating on her boyfriend. A few months later, her boyfriend asks you straight out: “Is \_\_\_ cheating on me?” What would you do?

**5. Insurance fraud?**



Your apartment was burglarized, and many things were stolen, including a television in your living room. That television, however, had been broken down, irreparably, and was worthless—you just haven't had the time or money to replace it. Luckily you have renter's insurance to cover your losses. Do you include the television in your insurance claim? What would you do?

## 2I. The Challenges of Living an Ethical Life



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Taking action and being accountable are two of the greater challenges we face in trying to live an ethical life—the willingness to do what we believe to be right or wrong, but also to be fully culpable for the decisions we make and actions we take. History, for example, has shown us how difficult this can be.

During WWII, a majority of people in Germany and the conquered countries of Europe were bystanders, trying to get on with their lives the best they could. Many did not speak out against Nazi oppression or risk their well-being by aiding those in need. After the war, some denied knowing the true nature of Nazi persecutions. Or they claimed they were just following orders. Or following the law. Or following the crowd.

Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) was a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. Niemöller is perhaps best remembered for the quotation, that succinctly captures the lack of action taken by some, as well as the potential consequences of indifference:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.*



*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

The term “genocide” did not exist before 1944. Writer and philosopher Hannah Arendt once wrote that (specifically referring to the German genocide of European Jews) that human history “has known no story more difficult to tell.” Even today, both Niemöller’s and Arendt’s statements remain relevant. They can be altered to fit differing political or social agendas, and still stand as a universal call for ethical action and vigilance in the face of oppression and injustice.

College students may struggle in understanding the ethics of issues like war and genocide due to the unfamiliarity and/or complexity of the topics. For many as well, they are still developing a sense of empathy towards others. Perhaps the basis of our ethical inquiry in our classrooms, then, to making ethical decisions, taking action, and being accountable focuses on two fundamental questions we can pose to students: “Is that the way I should treat someone else?” and “Is that the way someone else should treat me?”

Most people would indeed like to live an ethical life and to make good ethical decisions, but there are several challenges. Some will get caught up in debate about terms, definitions, and theories about ethics, preventing authentic and practical strategies from being implemented. Some might reason that “It won’t really make a difference” or “I don’t have time.” We should ask ourselves and our students to consider, though, if we were the ones in need of help, if these challenges would still be valid.

### **A Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

A *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is an international document that states basic rights and fundamental freedoms to which all human beings are entitled. The Universal Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948. Motivated by the experiences of the preceding

world wars, the Universal Declaration was the first time that countries agreed on a comprehensive statement of inalienable human rights.

## *Exercise*

Read this [document](#), and watch one of the following films to write about the connection between the two.

### ***Au Revoir les Enfants* (1987)**

This autobiographical film about two French boys in a Catholic boarding school during World War II. One of them is secretly Jewish, being hidden by the priests from the Nazis.

### ***The Killing Fields* (1984)**

This film is the true story of reporter Sidney Schanberg, and his colleague and friend, Cambodian journalist Dith Pran. Like most Westerners, Schanberg fled Cambodia after the murderous Khmer Rouge regime seized power in 1975, but Pran could not. For the next four years, Pran labored in rice paddies as the genocide unfolded around him.

### ***Casualties of War* (1989)**

The story of a five-man patrol in Vietnam that kidnaps and eventually kills a young girl and the one soldier in the group who refuses to participate.

### ***A Civil Action* (1998)**

Based on a real-life case, a lawyer agrees to represent eight families whose children died from leukemia after two large corporations leaked toxic chemicals into the water supply

of Woburn, Massachusetts, even though the case could mean financial and professional suicide for him.

***Snowpiercer* (2013)**

In a future where an experiment to halt global warming kills most of the humans on Earth, the survivors are on a train called the Snowpiercer that travels around the planet. A class system is installed, with the elite in the front and in the poor in the rear, and rebellions soon follow.

## 22. Ethics and Law

### Ethics and Law



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Ethics and laws are found in virtually all spheres of society. They govern actions of individuals around the world on a daily basis. They often work hand-in-hand to ensure that citizens act in a certain manner, and likewise coordinate efforts to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public. Though law often embodies ethical principals, law and ethics are not co-extensive. Based on society's ethics, laws are created and enforced by governments to mediate our relationships with each other, and to protect its citizens. While laws carry with them a punishment for violations, ethics do not. Essentially, laws enforce the behaviors we are expected to follow, while ethics suggest what we ought to follow, and help us explore options to improve our decision-making.

Ethical decision-making comes from within a person's moral sense and desire to preserve self respect. Laws are codifications of certain ethical values meant to help regulate society, and also impact decision-making. Driving carefully, for example, because you don't want to hurt someone is making a decision based on ethics. Driving carefully and within the speed limit because you see a police

car behind you suggests your fear of breaking the law and being punished for it.

It is not always a clear delineation though. Many acts that would be widely condemned as unethical are not prohibited by law – lying or betraying the confidence of a friend, for example. In addition, punishments for breaking laws can be harsh and sometimes even break ethical standards. Take the death penalty for instance. Ethics teaches that killing is wrong, yet the law also punishes people who break the law with death.

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau has an interesting perspective as to how we evolved from a “natural state” of ethics, to needing formal laws. According to Rousseau, people initially lived solitary, uncomplicated lives, with their few needs easily satisfied by nature. Because of the abundance of nature and the small size of the population, competition was non-existent, people rarely even saw one another; therefore, had much less reason for conflict or fear or inclination to cause harm to each other.

As time passed, however, and as the overall population increased, the means by which people could satisfy their needs had to change. People slowly began to live together in small families, and then in small communities. Divisions of labor were introduced, both within and between families, and discoveries and inventions made life easier, giving rise to leisure time. Such leisure time, and closer proximity to one another inevitably led people to make comparisons between themselves and others, resulting in public value systems being created. Most importantly however, according to Rousseau, was the invention of private property, which constituted the pivotal moment in social evolution where initial conditions of inequality became more pronounced.

Rousseau argues that now some have property and others are forced to work for them, consequently, the development of social classes begins. Eventually, those who have property notice that it would be in their interests to create a way that would protect private property from those who do not have it (as they can see the possibility it can be acquired by force). So, law, i.e. government, gets

established, and ethics (and decision-making) is formalized through a type of “social contract.”

Rousseau’s social contract theory(ies) may form a single, consistent view of the reasons for conflict and competition from which modern society suffers. We are born with freedom and equality by nature, but this nature has been corrupted by our contingent social history. We can overcome this “corruption,” however, by reconstituting ourselves with new laws and agreements—guided by ethical decision-making that is good for us individually and collectively. There is precedence that shows, while not easy, it is possible.

### **Teaching Strategy: The Syllabus as an Ethics Contract**

Your syllabus is a form of a social contract with students, so why not use it to raise awareness about ethical decision-making and laws? Most syllabi already contain policy about ethics including statements about academic integrity. Perhaps it is time to use the syllabus to bring awareness to larger campus issues. Add a paragraph, for example, about Title IX, and remind students about issues of campus sexual violence:

*“Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender is a Civil Rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources here...”*

A statement like this in a syllabus could send a multipronged message: Survivors are supported and will have the information needed to report any violence they have witnessed or suffered, and that the campus community as a whole is watching and will hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. It is a simple way to launch a discussion about ethics, ethical-decision making, and the law to demonstrate how much it matters in your class.

PART IV

# CHAPTER 4: MAKING MISTAKES IN REASONING





## 23. Arguments and Premises

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?

Here it would help to review the following questions from the section of the Handbook that covers the [CORE 102 Research Narrative](#) assignment:

- [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.

For more information on the types of sources, review [What is a primary source?](#), [What is a secondary source?](#), and [What is a tertiary source?](#) under the [Opposing Viewpoints](#) assignment in CORE 101.

## Why should I evaluate unstated or suppressed premises as well as stated ones?

An **unstated** or **suppressed premise** is assumed rather than voiced outright but is nevertheless needed for an argument to work. Consider this highly unscientific poll conducted by a TV news station. “Which do you believe Senator Hillary Clinton is most out of touch with: illegal immigration, border security, or the American people?” The pollster is operating as if it is unquestionable that Clinton is out of touch with *something*. In other words, the question **presupposes** that she is “out of touch.” However, this unstated premise is debatable once it is brought out into the open. Is she in fact out of touch at all? This is actually a type of logical

fallacy, begging the question, which will be covered in a later section.

A listener or reader who is not alert to such **unstated** or **suppressed premises** is, without realizing it, agreeing to debate on the communicator's terms—when those terms may be unfair. In fact, on more complex or serious issues it is often things people take for granted that may actually deserve the most critical scrutiny. For example, in the argument “This medication is labelled as totally natural, so it is safe for me to take it,” the suppressed premise—that “natural” guarantees “safe”—is not trivial and can certainly be challenged.

## How does argument diagramming or outlining help to illuminate the structure of an argument?

Besides recognizing the use of induction and deduction, you can use **diagramming** or **outlining** to develop an understanding of an argument's overall structure. Remember that an argument as defined here isn't a “quarrel”, but rather a group of statements, some of which, the premises, are offered in support for another, the conclusion. So the first order of business in analyzing an argument is to recognize what the main claim is—the conclusion—and what other claims are being used to support it—the premises, which is much easier to do when the arguer is explicit about the steps in the argument. The arguer can make the steps clear by using premise and conclusion indicator terms as signposts. Below is a list of such terms.

Words that introduce or signal an argument conclusion include *therefore*, *so*, *we may conclude/infer*, *thus*, and *consequently*. Words that introduce or signal argument premises include *it follows that*, *implies that*, *as a result*, *because* (non-causal meaning), *since*, *for the reason that*, *for*, and *and*.\*

\***and** often signals the introduction of a further premise, as in “You should believe Z **because** reason 1 **and** reason 2”.

When you are diagramming or outlining an argument, if the “flow” of an argument from premises to conclusion isn’t readily apparent, then remember to use the above indicator terms to help you decide which claim is the conclusion and which claims are the premises. Using the indicator terms is particularly helpful because a conclusion may be stated first, last, or anywhere in between. People do all three when they write or talk in real life, so we cannot tell whether a statement is a conclusion simply by where it is positioned in the argument.

## What is the purpose of diagramming or outlining an argument?

Diagramming or mapping someone else’s argument serves a double purpose. First, the process helps you clearly see just what the other person is saying. It helps you identify the logical structure of the argument, which is necessary if you are to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the argument in order to know whether or not to accept it. Second, you develop skills of analysis that you will need in order to organize and present arguments in support of a position that you may want to take on some question or issue.

## What are the steps to diagramming or outlining an argument?

Here are the basic moves that are required in order to create a clear diagram or outline of an argument.

Identify all the claims made by the author. Since a sentence can contain multiple claims, rewrite statements so that you have one

claim per sentence. Adopt some sort of numbering or labeling system for the claims—your instructor may have one that she wishes you to follow.

Eliminate “fluff.” Ignore repetitions, assurances (assertions not backed by evidence or reasons), and information that is unrelated to the argument.

Identify which statements are premises and which statement is the main conclusion.

Recognize that there may be sub-conclusions in addition to a final or main conclusion. You may think of a sub-conclusion as the end point of a sub-argument nested inside the larger argument. Although the sub-conclusion is itself the conclusion of a nested argument, supported by premises, it also functions as a premise supporting the final or main conclusion.

Recognize that some premises are independent and others linked. If you were drawing or mapping the argument, you would be able to draw an arrow from an independent premise directly to the conclusion it supports. Linked premises, however, are multiple statements that must be combined to provide support for a conclusion. If you were drawing or mapping the argument, you would have to find some way to show that the linked premises as a group support the conclusion. You might use color coding, or underlining, or circling, or + signs—some way to connect the linked premises before drawing **one** arrow from the clustered premises to the conclusion they support.

## How can the argument’s paragraphing help me evaluate how the author uses premises?

An author must organize her material to guide the audience through her argument. One tool available to an author is the paragraph. The sentences clustered together in a paragraph should be tightly connected in terms of content. In the commonest form of

paragraph, the clustered sentences collectively develop an idea explicitly stated in a topic sentence and don't contain any extra material related to other ideas. The paragraphs themselves should be placed in an order that reflects some overall plan so that the paragraphs reveal the steps or stages of the argument.

The premises may be said to be key steps or stages in the argument. **A well-constructed argument therefore may use each premise as a topic sentence for a paragraph.** Additionally, a premise may serve as the guiding idea for a group of paragraphs, each developing a subtopic. For example, the premise, reached by induction, that "College students overestimate the amount of binge drinking that is taking place" might introduce a cluster of three paragraphs, each showing that the overestimation varies by subgroup—with member of sororities, member of fraternities, and non-Greek populations arriving at different estimates.

Look to see whether the author has used paragraphing-by-premise to organize her argument and outline its structure for the audience. You should also ask yourself whether any paragraphs are missing. That is, as you consider what premises serve as the foundations of the argument, be alert for the suppressed ones, the premises that the author assumes to be automatically true. These unacknowledged premises may be ones that the author hopes the audience will not notice or question. In your analysis call her on it by determining where a paragraph on that premise should have appeared in the argument.

## 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. The argument now has a structure that can be outlined or diagrammed.



## 24. Logical Fallacies

### 1. 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.

### 2. 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.

### 3. 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.

## 4. 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.

## 25. Syllogisms

### WHAT IS A SYLLOGISM?

The term syllogism is applied to the distinctive form of argument that is the application of deductive reasoning. A syllogism includes two premises that are compared against each other in order to infer a conclusion.

The following is an example of a syllogism:

- Major Premise: No insect is warm-blooded.
- Minor Premise: The wasp is an insect.
- Conclusion: No wasp is warm-blooded.

In this syllogism members of a category do not possess a certain characteristic (major premise). An individual is in that category (minor premise). Therefore, that individual cannot possess the characteristic (conclusion).

### WHAT IS A CATEGORICAL SYLLOGISM?

The example syllogism in the previous section is a categorical syllogism. In a categorical syllogism, the major premise will state something that will be taken as an absolute (categorical) starting point, and the minor premise will be examined against this absolute starting point in order to infer the conclusion.

Examples of categorical statements:

- All raccoons are omnivores.
- No insect is warm-blooded.
- Some mammals are omnivores.
- Some mammals are not omnivores.

### WHEN IS A CATEGORICAL SYLLOGISM A FALLACY?

A categorical syllogism can be fallacious either because a premise is untrue or because the relationship between the major and minor premise does not support the conclusion.

- Untrue premise leading to a fallacious conclusion:

Major premise: All swimming vertebrates are fish.

Minor premise: The whale is a swimming vertebrate.

Conclusion: The whale is a fish.

In fact, not all swimming vertebrates are fish so the conclusion that the whale is a fish is unsound.

- Relationship between major and minor premise does not support conclusion:

Major premise: Some instructors lack a sense of humor.

Minor premise: Kim is an instructor.

Conclusion: Kim lacks a sense of humor.

Certainly somewhere in the world an instructor must lack a sense of humor, so let us agree that the major premise is true. Let us also agree that the Kim in the minor premise is an instructor. Still, the conclusion is unsound because it is impossible to determine whether Kim belongs to the group that lacks a sense of humor. A major premise that states that only some members of a group have a characteristic can *never* set the stage for concluding that any particular member of the group has that characteristic.

### **WHAT IS AN IF/THEN SYLLOGISM?**

An alternative name for the if/then syllogism is the hypothetical syllogism, but you may find it handy to use the if/then label because the characteristic sign of such a syllogism is the 'if/then' in the major premise. Here are the two common forms:

- Major premise: If A then B.
- Minor premise: A is true.
- Conclusion: Therefore, B is true
  
- Major premise: If the price of steel goes up then car production goes down.
- Minor premise: The price of steel goes up.
- Conclusion: Therefore, car production goes down.

- Major premise: If A then B.
- Minor premise: B is not true.
- Conclusion:     Therefore, A is not true
  
- Major premise: If student scores rise then the state pays a bonus to the school district.
- Minor premise: The state did not pay a bonus to the school district.
- Conclusion:     Therefore, student scores did not rise.

*When is an if/then syllogism a fallacy?*

Remember that a syllogism may be fallacious if a premise is false. In the case of the either/or fallacy, the major premise must accurately capture a logical relationship—that is, the ‘if’ must actually be a condition for the ‘then’. An if/then syllogism also may be fallacious if the major premise oversimplifies matters by identifying only one condition when in fact several are necessary.

Example of a fallacious if/then syllogism:

- Major premise:     If her overall GPA is 2.0 then she will graduate.
- Minor premise:     Her overall GPA is 2.0.
- Conclusion:         Therefore, she will graduate.

What if the student’s major has a GPA requirement as well? For example, a department may require a 2.5 GPA for all courses taken for the major.

## 26. Fallacies of Relevance



### LOGICAL FALLACIES

Fallacies are mistakes in reasoning. We learn about them so we can identify when someone else uses them, but most importantly so we can avoid them and present better arguments.

#### *Appeal to Force (argumentum ad baculum)*

In the [appeal to force](#), someone in a position of power threatens to bring down unfortunate consequences upon anyone who dares to disagree with a proffered proposition. Although it is rarely developed so explicitly, a fallacy of this type might propose:

- *If you do not agree with my political opinions, you will receive a grade of F for this course.*

- *I believe that Herbert Hoover was the greatest President of the United States.*
- *Therefore, Herbert Hoover was the greatest President of the United States.*

It should be clear that even if all of the premises were true, the conclusion could nevertheless be false. Since that is possible, arguments of this form are plainly invalid. While this might be an effective way to get you to agree (or at least to pretend to agree) with my position, it offers no grounds for believing it to be true.

### **Appeal to Pity (*argumentum ad misericordiam*)**

Turning this on its head, an [appeal to pity](#) tries to win acceptance by pointing out the unfortunate consequences that will otherwise fall upon the speaker and others, for whom we would then feel sorry.

- *I am a single parent, solely responsible for the financial support of my children.*
- *If you give me this traffic ticket, I will lose my license and be unable to drive to work.*
- *If I cannot work, my children and I will become homeless and may starve to death.*
- *Therefore, you should not give me this traffic ticket.*

Again, the conclusion may be false (that is, perhaps I should be given the ticket) even if the premises are all true, so the argument is fallacious. Appeal to Emotion (*argumentum ad populum*)

In a more general fashion, the [appeal to emotion](#) relies upon emotively charged language to arouse strong feelings that may lead an audience to accept its conclusion:

- *As all clear-thinking residents of our fine state have already realized, the Governor's plan for financing public education is nothing but the bloody-fanged wolf of socialism cleverly disguised in the harmless sheep's clothing of concern for*

children.

- *Therefore, the Governor's plan is bad public policy.*

The problem here is that although the flowery language of the premise might arouse strong feelings in many members of its intended audience, the widespread occurrence of those feelings has nothing to do with the truth of the conclusion.

### **Appeal to Authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*)**

Each of the next three fallacies involve the mistaken supposition that there is some connection between the truth of a proposition and some feature of the person who asserts or denies it. In an [appeal to authority](#), the opinion of someone famous or accomplished in another area of expertise is supposed to guarantee the truth of a conclusion. Thus, for example:

- *Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan believes that spiders are insects.*
- *Therefore, spiders are insects.*

As a pattern of reasoning, this is clearly mistaken: no proposition must be true because some individual (however talented or successful) happens to believe it. Even in areas where they have some special knowledge or skill, expert authorities could be mistaken; we may accept their testimony as inductive evidence but never as deductive proof of the truth of a conclusion. Personality is irrelevant to truth.

### **Ad Hominem Argument**

The mirror-image of the appeal to authority is the [ad hominem argument](#), in which we are encouraged to reject a proposition because it is the stated opinion of someone regarded as disreputable in some way. This can happen in several different ways, but all involve the claim that the proposition must be false because of who believes it to be true:

- *Harold maintains that the legal age for drinking beer should be*



18 instead of 21.

- But we all know that Harold . . .
  - . . . dresses funny and smells bad. or
  - . . . is 19 years old and would like to drink legally or
  - . . . believes that the legal age for voting should be 21, not 18 or
  - . . . doesn't understand the law any better than the rest of us
- Therefore, the legal age for drinking beer should be 21 instead of 18.

In any of its varieties, the *ad hominem* fallacy asks us to adopt a position on the truth of a conclusion for no better reason than that someone believes its opposite. But the proposition that person believes can be true (and the intended conclusion false) even if the person is unsavory or has a stake in the issue or holds inconsistent beliefs or shares a common flaw with us. Again, personality is irrelevant to truth.

#### **Appeal to Ignorance (*argumentum ad ignoratiam*)**

An [appeal to ignorance](#) proposes that we accept the truth of a proposition unless an opponent can prove otherwise. Thus, for example:

- No one has conclusively proven that there is no intelligent life on the moons of Jupiter.
- Therefore, there is intelligent life on the moons of Jupiter.

But, of course, the absence of [evidence](#) against a proposition is not enough to secure its truth. What we don't know could nevertheless be so.

#### **Irrelevant Conclusion (*ignoratio elenchi*)**

Finally, the fallacy of the [irrelevant conclusion](#) tries to establish the truth of a proposition by offering an argument that actually provides support for an entirely different conclusion.

- *All children should have ample attention from their parents.*
- *Parents who work full-time cannot give ample attention to their children.*
- *Therefore, mothers should not work full-time.*

Here the premises might support some conclusion about working parents generally, but do not secure the truth of a conclusion focussed on women alone and not on men. Although clearly fallacious, this procedure may succeed in distracting its audience from the point that is really at issue.

## 27. Fallacies of Presumption

### *Unwarranted Assumptions*

The fallacies of presumption also fail to provide adequate reason for believing the truth of their conclusions. In these instances, however, the erroneous reasoning results from an implicit supposition of some further proposition whose truth is uncertain or implausible. Again, we'll consider each of them in turn, seeking always to identify the unwarranted assumption upon which it is based.

#### **Accident**

The fallacy of [accident](#) begins with the statement of some principle that is true as a general rule, but then errs by applying this principle to a specific case that is unusual or atypical in some way.

- *Women earn less than men earn for doing the same work.*
- *Oprah Winfrey is a woman.*
- *Therefore, Oprah Winfrey earns less than male talk-show hosts.*

As we'll soon see, a true [universal premise](#) would [entail](#) the truth of this conclusion; but then, a universal statement that "Every woman earns less than any man." would obviously be false. The truth of a general rule, on the other hand, leaves plenty of room for exceptional cases, and applying it to any of them is fallacious.

#### **Converse Accident**

The fallacy of [converse accident](#) begins with a specific case that is unusual or atypical in some way, and then errs by deriving from this case the truth of a general rule.

- *Dennis Rodman wears earrings and is an excellent rebounder.*
- *Therefore, people who wear earrings are excellent rebounders.*

It should be obvious that a single instance is not enough to establish the truth of such a general principle. Since it's easy for this conclusion to be false even though the premise is true, the argument is unreliable.

### *False Cause*

The fallacy of [false cause](#) infers the presence of a causal connections simply because events appear to occur in correlation or (in the [post hoc, ergo propter hoc](#) variety) temporal succession.

- *The moon was full on Thursday evening.*
- *On Friday morning I overslept.*
- *Therefore, the full moon caused me to oversleep.*

Later we'll consider what sort of [evidence](#) adequately supports the conclusion that a [causal relationship](#) does exist, but these fallacies clearly are not enough.

### **Begging the Question (*petitio principii*)**

[Begging the question](#) is the fallacy of using the conclusion of an argument as one of the premises offered in its own support. Although this often happens in an implicit or disguised fashion, an explicit version would look like this:

- *All dogs are mammals.*
- *All mammals have hair.*
- *Since animals with hair bear live young, dogs bear live young.*
- *But all animals that bear live young are mammals.*
- *Therefore, all dogs are mammals.*

Unlike the other fallacies we've considered, begging the question involves an argument (or chain of arguments) that is formally valid:

if its premises (including the first) are true, then the conclusion must be true. The problem is that this valid argument doesn't really provide support for the truth its conclusion; we can't use it unless we have already granted that.

### **Complex Question**

The fallacy of [complex question](#) presupposes the truth of its own conclusion by including it implicitly in the statement of the issue to be considered:

- *Have you tried to stop watching too much television?*
- *If so, then you admit that you do watch too much television.*
- *If not, then you must still be watching too much television.*
  
- *Therefore, you watch too much television.*

In a somewhat more subtle fashion, this involves the same difficulty as the previous fallacy. We would not willingly agree to the first premise unless we already accepted the truth of the conclusion that the argument is supposed to prove.

## 28. Fallacies of Ambiguity

### *Ambiguous Language*

In addition to the fallacies of relevance and presumption we examined in our previous lessons, there are several patterns of incorrect reasoning that arise from the imprecise use of language. An [ambiguous](#) word, phrase, or sentence is one that has two or more distinct meanings. The inferential relationship between the propositions included in a single argument will be sure to hold only if we are careful to employ exactly the same meaning in each of them. The fallacies of ambiguity all involve a confusion of two or more different senses.

#### **Equivocation**

An [equivocation](#) trades upon the use of an ambiguous word or phrase in one of its meanings in one of the propositions of an argument but also in another of its meanings in a second proposition.

- Really exciting novels are rare.
- But rare books are expensive.
- Therefore, Really exciting novels are expensive.

Here, the word “rare” is used in different ways in the two premises of the argument, so the link they seem to establish between the terms of the conclusion is spurious. In its more subtle occurrences, this fallacy can undermine the reliability of [otherwise valid deductive arguments](#).

#### **Amphiboly**

An [amphiboly](#) can occur even when every term in an argument is [univocal](#), if the grammatical construction of a sentence creates its own ambiguity.

- *A reckless motorist Thursday struck and injured a student who was jogging through the campus in his pickup truck.*
- *Therefore, it is unsafe to jog in your pickup truck.*

In this example, the premise (actually heard on a radio broadcast) could be interpreted in different ways, creating the possibility of a fallacious inference to the conclusion.

### **Accent**

The fallacy of [accent](#) arises from an ambiguity produced by a shift of spoken or written emphasis. Thus, for example:

- *Jorge turned in his assignment on time today.*
- *Therefore, Jorge usually turns in his assignments late.*

Here the premise may be true if read without inflection, but if it is read with heavy stress on the last word seems to imply the truth of the conclusion.

### **Composition**

The fallacy of [composition](#) involves an inference from the attribution of some feature to every individual member of a class (or part of a greater whole) to the possession of the same feature by the entire class (or whole).

- *Every course I took in college was well-organized.*
- *Therefore, my college education was well-organized.*

Even if the premise is true of each and every component of my curriculum, the whole could have been a chaotic mess, so this reasoning is defective.

Notice that this is distinct from the [fallacy of converse accident](#), which improperly generalizes from an unusual specific case (as in “My philosophy course was well-organized; therefore, college courses are well-organized.”). For the fallacy of composition, the

crucial fact is that even when something can be truly said of each and every individual part, it does not follow that the same can be truly said of the whole class.

### **Division**

Similarly, the fallacy of [division](#) involves an inference from the attribution of some feature to an entire class (or whole) to the possession of the same feature by each of its individual members (or parts).

- *Ocelots are now dying out.*
- *Sparky is an ocelot.*
- *Therefore, Sparky is now dying out.*

Although the premise is true of the species as a whole, this unfortunate fact does not reflect poorly upon the health of any of its individual members.

Again, be sure to distinguish this from the [fallacy of accident](#), which mistakenly applies a general rule to an atypical specific case (as in “Ocelots have many health problems, and Sparky is an ocelot; therefore, Sparky is in poor health”). The essential point in the fallacy of division is that even when something can be truly said of a whole class, it does not follow that the same can be truly said of each of its individual parts.

### **Avoiding Fallacies**

Informal fallacies of all seventeen varieties can seriously interfere with our ability to arrive at the truth. Whether they are committed inadvertently in the course of an individual's own thinking or deliberately employed in an effort to manipulate others, each may persuade without providing legitimate grounds for the truth of its conclusion. But knowing what the fallacies are affords us some protection in either case. If we can identify several of the most common patterns of incorrect reasoning, we are less likely to slip into them ourselves or to be fooled by anyone else.



PART V

# CHAPTER 5: ETHICAL THEORIES



## 29. Moral Relativism

### What is moral relativism?

**Moral relativism** rejects the view that there are universal and never-changing ethical standards that can always be used to judge whether actions are right and wrong. Instead, a moral relativist might argue that ethical judgments are made within the context of a culture and time period. People in one culture or time period may judge an action to be ethical; people in another culture or time period may judge the same action to be unethical.

Some moral relativists even reject the notion that cultures determine what is right and wrong. Instead, these moral relativists argue that each *individual* must develop his or her own standards for determining what is ethical. These standards might be based on reason or on intuition, something like a 'gut feeling' that an action is ethical.

People may be drawn to moral relativism because it appears to be a tolerant view. They may feel that adopting moral relativism will eliminate the conflicts that may arise between people and cultures that reach different conclusions about what is right or wrong.

### What is the main weakness of moral relativism?

**Moral relativism** may be embraced by people who value tolerance. However, you could argue that a moral relativist who treats tolerance as something that is unquestionably good has actually *abandoned* moral relativism. Critics of moral relativism sometimes

ask this question: Is it logically possible to be a moral relativist and to simultaneously behave as if tolerance is a *universal* value?

If what is right is whatever a culture determines to be right, then slavery is ethical in a slave-owning society or household. If what is right is whatever an individual determines to be right, then denying a girl access to education is ethical in a household whose head believes it is inappropriate for girls to be educated.

On the one hand, then, moral relativism does not impose value systems on people. On the other hand, it seems to grant humans autonomy—the freedom to act in one’s own interest—to people who would deny that autonomy to other people.

## What is universalism?

Imagine that there is one never-changing and universal set of standard for deciding whether an action is ethical. That approach to judging behavior is called **universalism**. A person who follows this approach believes that guidelines for judging behavior are not affected by time and culture. What is right is always right, and what is wrong is always wrong—without exception and everywhere in the world. Consequentialism and deontology are universalist ethical theories.

# 30. Moral Relativism Continued...

## **Moral Relativism**



The principles of morality can be viewed as either relativist or absolutist (Souryal, 2011). Moral relativism refers to the differences in morality from culture to culture. A moral relativist's perspective would state that what is moral in one culture may not be moral in another culture, depending upon the culture. This is important for police officers to understand in a pluralistic society in which many cultures and religions make up the community where the police officer works. It is important for officers to appreciate that what may be immoral in a traditional Canadian sense may not be moral to members of a culture traditionally found outside of Canada. In realizing this, officers may be able to withhold judgment, or at the very least empathize with the members from that community for what in the officer's perspective may be an immoral act.

Morality in policing is, in most cases, relativistic since police officers are prone to accept moral standards that allow them to achieve goals within the police subculture, often at times contrary to the morals within mainstream society (Catlin and Maupin, 2002). It is moral relativism that enables police officers to accept lying to suspects in interviews in order to gain confessions, or to witnesses to gain compliance. In this instance, an officer may believe that lying is not morally permissible in certain circumstances, but is permissible in other situations. Another example in which a moral relativist perspective may assist an officer is in understanding circumstances surrounding physical punishment of children who misbehave. A culture may maintain that physical punishment is morally permissible, even though in Canada the same punishment may be in violation of the Criminal Code. It is helpful for officers to understand this while investigating these offenses, so that they can build rapport and empathize with suspects, and use moral relativity as a theme in interviews to alleviate the guilt the suspect may feel.

Contrary to relativism, moral absolutism refers to the belief that morality is the same throughout all cultures; that what is right in one culture is right in all cultures and what is wrong in one culture is wrong in every culture. Here, the immoral act is always

wrong, no matter the culture, because there are universal rules governing morality. Police officers who are absolutists would reject lying, relying instead on a deontological perspective in which the consequences of the lie do not matter.

Moral relativism is a meta-ethical theory because it seeks to understand whether morality is the same in different cultures. Proponents of moral relativism do not observe universal rules governing moral conduct; rather, moral rules are contingent on at least one of:

- Personality (McDonald, 2010)
- Culture (McDonald, 2010)
- Situations (Catlin and Maupin, 2010).

The difficulty with applying relativism to the police culture is that it does not take into account the diversity of individuals that make up the police culture (Westmarland, 2008). One of the initiatives of community policing is that police agencies now recruit from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Barlow and Barlow, 2009; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2009). This diversity within law enforcement is reflected by the wide array of attitudes that police have toward various issues and the change that has occurred within policing (Newburn and Reiner, 2007). The ability of cultural norms to change is ever-present, and norms can and do change to reflect the values of other cultures (Groarke, 2011). Ultimately, cultural relativism reflects the notion that what is right is permissible in the culture the actor is within and that moral principles are not universal (McDonald, 2010). Within the policing context, the moral underpinnings of members of the police subculture are often in step with the morals of mainstream society, but at times they are not.



## 31. Types of Relativism

### TYPES OF RELATIVISM:

**Cultural relativism** describes the simple fact that there are different cultures and each has different ways of behaving, thinking and feeling as its members learn such from the previous generation. There is an enormous amount of evidence to confirm this claim. It is well known by just about every human on the planet that people do things differently around the globe. People dress differently, eat differently, speak different languages, sing different songs, have different music and dances and have many different customs.



This is a scientific theory well supported by the evidence gathered by cultural anthropologists.

**Descriptive ethical relativism** describes the fact that in different cultures one of the variants is the sense of morality: the mores, customs and ethical principles may all vary from one culture to another. There is a great deal of information available to confirm

this as well. What is thought to be moral in one country may be thought to be immoral and even made illegal in another country.

**This is a scientific theory well supported by the evidence gathered by cultural anthropologists.**

Examples:

| Moral in USA                        | Immoral in                       |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Eating Beef                         | India                            |
| Drinking alcohol, Gambling          | Middle Eastern Islamic Countries |
| Women in school or business         | Afghanistan                      |
| Women wearing shorts, face uncoverd | Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan        |

Or the reverse pattern

| Immoral in USA                                  | Moral or Acceptable                              |
|---|--|
| Killing newborn females                         | China, India                                     |
| Female genital mutilation                       | Many African nations (It is female circumcision) |
| Family kills a woman family member who is raped | Somalia, Sudan                                   |

*Exercise*

Can you think of other examples?

**Normative ethical relativism** is a theory, which claims that there are no universally valid moral principles. Normative ethical relativism theory says that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. The theory claims that all thinking about the basic principles of morality (Ethics) is always relative. Each culture establishes the basic values and principles that serve as the foundation for morality. The theory claims that this is the case now, has always been the case and will always be the case.

|   | <b>Skepticism</b>                 | <b>Absolutism</b>  |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Relativism</b>   | <b>-no moral principles exist</b> | There are universal ethical principles that apply to all humans.<br>There are absolutes.                   |
| Cultural Relativism   |                                   | There exists a moral core-without which<br>i.society will not flourish<br>ii.individuals will not flourish |
| Descriptive Ethical Relativism  |                                   |  |
| Normative Ethical Relativism  |                                   |  |
| no universal criteria   |                                   | A) there exist moral truths  |
| no absolutes not even tolerance   |                                   | B) Reason can discover truths  |
| no criticism of majority  |                                   | C) it is in our interest to promote them   |
| reduces to subjectivism   |                                   |  |
| We should not make moral judgements concerning other individuals and societies. |                                   | We do and should judge other individuals and societies with reason and with sympathy and understanding.    |

Have you ever thought or heard and not challenged the idea that we should not make moral judgments of other people? Have you ever thought that each person must make up his or her own mind about what his or her moral rules will be? Have you ever accepted the idea that “Unless you walk a mile in the other man’s moccasins, you can not make a judgment concerning him”?

Have you ever thought that while some act might not be morally correct for you it might be correct for another person or conversely have you thought that while some act might be morally correct for you it might not be morally correct for another person? Have you thought that each person must make up his or her own morality?

Well, if you answered, “Yes” to any of the above you have relativistic ideas operating in your thought system. Now you might ask yourself whether or not you really accept those ideas?

Do you believe that you must go out and kill several people in order to make the judgment that a serial killer is doing something wrong? Do you really believe that you need to kidnap, rape, kill and eat several young men in order to reach the conclusion that Jeffrey Damer did something wrong, morally wrong and horrible?

Do you think that killing newborn babies because they are females is wrong, even for the Chinese? Don’t you think that once the Chinese and Indians and Africans have a higher quality of life and are better educated that they will and should stop doing those things that harm, kill or degrade women? If you do you have absolutist ideas working in you as well.

How can you hold opposing ideas at the same time?

## 32. Culture



## Introduction to Culture

Are there rules for eating at McDonald's? Generally, we do not think about rules in a fast food restaurant, but if you look around one on a typical weekday, you will see people acting as if they were trained for the role of fast food customer. They stand in line, pick items from the colorful menus, swipe debit cards to pay, and wait to collect trays of food. After a quick meal, customers wad up their paper wrappers and toss them into garbage cans. Customers' movement through this fast food routine is orderly and predictable, even if no rules are posted and no officials direct the process.

If you want more insight into these unwritten rules, think about what would happen if you behaved according to some other standards. (You would be doing what sociologists call *ethnomethodology*: deliberately disrupting social norms in order to learn about them.) For example, call ahead for reservations, ask the cashier detailed questions about the food's ingredients or how it is prepared. Ask to have your meal served to you at your table. Or throw your trash on the ground as you leave. Chances are, you will elicit hostile responses from the restaurant employees and your fellow customers.

People have written entire books analyzing the significance of fast food customs. They examine the extensive, detailed physicality of fast food: the food itself, wrappers, bags, trays, those tiny ketchup packets, the tables and chairs, and even the restaurant building. Everything about a chain restaurant reflects **culture**, the beliefs and behaviors that a social group shares. Sociological analysis can be applied to every expression of culture, from sporting events to holidays, from education to transportation, from fashion to etiquette.

In everyday conversation, people rarely distinguish between the terms "culture" and "society," but the terms have slightly different

meanings, and the distinction is important to a sociologist. A **society** describes a group of people who share a common territory and a culture. By “territory,” sociologists refer to a definable region—as small as a neighborhood (e.g., East Vancouver or “the west side of town”), as large as a country (e.g., Ethiopia, Canada, or Nepal), or somewhere in between (in Canada, this might include someone who identifies with the West Coast, the Prairies, or Atlantic Canada). To clarify, a culture represents the beliefs, practices and artifacts of a group, while society represents the social structures and organization of the people who share those beliefs and practices. Neither society nor culture could exist without the other. In this chapter, we examine the relationship between culture and society in greater detail, paying special attention to the elements and forces that shape culture, including diversity and cultural changes. A final discussion touches on the different theoretical perspectives from which sociologists research culture.

## What Is Culture?

Humans are social creatures. Since the dawn of *Homo sapiens* nearly 250,000 years ago, people have grouped together into communities in order to survive. Living together, people form common habits and behaviors—from specific methods of childrearing to preferred techniques for obtaining food. In modern-day Paris, many people shop daily at outdoor markets to pick up what they need for their evening meal, buying cheese, meat, and vegetables from different specialty stalls. In the Canada, the majority of people shop once a week at supermarkets, filling large carts to the brim. The Parisian Roland Barthes disdainfully referred to this as “the hasty stocking up” of a “more mechanical civilization” (Barthes 1977).

Almost every human behavior, from shopping to marriage to expressions of feelings, is learned. In Canada, people tend to view marriage as a choice between two people, based on mutual feelings



of love. In other nations and in other times, marriages have been arranged through an intricate process of interviews and negotiations between entire families, or in other cases, through a direct system such as a “mail order bride.” To someone raised in Winnipeg, the marriage customs of a family from Nigeria may seem strange, or even wrong. Conversely, someone from a traditional Kolkata family might be perplexed with the idea of romantic love as the foundation for the lifelong commitment of marriage. In other words, the way in which people view marriage depends largely on what they have been taught.

Behavior based on learned customs is not a bad thing. Being familiar with unwritten rules helps people feel secure and “normal.” Most people want to live their daily lives confident that their behavior will not be challenged or disrupted. But even an action as seemingly simple as commuting to work evidences a great deal of cultural propriety.



Take the case of going to work on public transportation. Whether commuting in Dublin, Cairo, Mumbai, or Vancouver, many behaviors will be the same in all locations, but significant differences also arise between cultures. Typically, a passenger would find a marked bus stop or station, wait for the bus or train, pay an agent before or after boarding, and quietly take a seat if one is available. But when boarding a bus in Cairo, passengers might have to run, because buses there often do not come to a full stop to take on patrons. Dublin bus riders would be expected to extend an arm to indicate that they want the bus to stop for them. And when boarding a commuter train in Mumbai, passengers must squeeze into overstuffed cars amid a lot of pushing and shoving on the crowded platforms. That kind of behavior would be considered the height of rudeness in Canada, but in Mumbai it reflects the daily challenges of getting around on a train system that is taxed to capacity.

In this example of commuting, culture consists of thoughts (expectations about personal space, for example) and tangible things (bus stops, trains, and seating capacity). **Material culture** refers to the objects or belongings of a group of people. Metro passes and bus tokens are part of material culture, as are automobiles, stores, and the physical structures where people worship. **Nonmaterial culture**, in contrast, consists of the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society. Material and nonmaterial aspects of culture are linked, and physical objects often symbolize cultural ideas. A metro pass is a material object, but it represents a form of nonmaterial culture, namely, capitalism, and the acceptance of paying for transportation. Clothing, hairstyles, and jewellery are part of material culture, but the appropriateness of wearing certain clothing for specific events reflects nonmaterial culture. A school building belongs to material culture, but the teaching methods and educational standards are part of education's nonmaterial culture. These material and nonmaterial aspects of culture can vary subtly from region to region. As people travel farther afield, moving from different regions to entirely different parts of the world, certain

material and nonmaterial aspects of culture become dramatically unfamiliar. What happens when we encounter different cultures? As we interact with cultures other than our own, we become more aware of the differences and commonalities between others' worlds and our own.

## Cultural Universals

Often, a comparison of one culture to another will reveal obvious differences. But all cultures share common elements. **Cultural universals** are patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies. One example of a cultural universal is the family unit: every human society recognizes a family structure that regulates sexual reproduction and the care of children. Even so, how that family unit is defined and how it functions vary. In many Asian cultures, for example, family members from all generations commonly live together in one household. In these cultures, young adults will continue to live in the extended household family structure until they marry and join their spouse's household, or they may remain and raise their nuclear family within the extended family's homestead. In Canada, by contrast, individuals are expected to leave home and live independently for a period before forming a family unit consisting of parents and their offspring.

Anthropologist George Murdock first recognized the existence of cultural universals while studying systems of kinship around the world. Murdock found that cultural universals often revolve around basic human survival, such as finding food, clothing, and shelter, or around shared human experiences, such as birth and death, or illness and healing. Through his research, Murdock identified other universals including language, the concept of personal names, and, interestingly, jokes. Humor seems to be a universal way to release tensions and create a sense of unity among people (Murdock 1949).

Sociologists consider humour necessary to human interaction because it helps individuals navigate otherwise tense situations.

## **Making Connections: Sociological Research**

### Is Music a Cultural Universal?

Imagine that you are sitting in a theater, watching a film. The movie opens with the heroine sitting on a park bench, a grim expression on her face. Cue the music. The first slow and mournful notes are played in a minor key. As the melody continues, the heroine turns her head and sees a man walking toward her. The music slowly gets louder, and the dissonance of the chords sends a prickle of fear running down your spine. You sense that the heroine is in danger.

Now imagine that you are watching the same movie, but with a different soundtrack. As the scene opens, the music is soft and soothing, with a hint of sadness. You see the heroine sitting on the park bench and sense her loneliness. Suddenly, the music swells. The woman looks up and sees a man walking toward her. The music grows fuller, and the pace picks up. You feel your heart rise in your chest. This is a happy moment.

Music has the ability to evoke emotional responses. In television shows, movies, even commercials, music

elicits laughter, sadness, or fear. Are these types of musical cues cultural universals?

In 2009, a team of psychologists, led by Thomas Fritz of the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany, studied people's reactions to music they'd never heard (Fritz et al. 2009). The research team traveled to Cameroon, Africa, and asked Mafa tribal members to listen to Western music. The tribe, isolated from Western culture, had never been exposed to Western culture and had no context or experience within which to interpret its music. Even so, as the tribal members listened to a Western piano piece, they were able to recognize three basic emotions: happiness, sadness, and fear. Music, it turns out, is a sort of universal language.

Researchers also found that music can foster a sense of wholeness within a group. In fact, scientists who study the evolution of language have concluded that originally language (an established component of group identity) and music were one (Darwin 1871). Additionally, since music is largely nonverbal, the sounds of music can cross societal boundaries more easily than words. Music allows people to make connections where language might be a more difficult barricade. As Fritz and his team found, music and the emotions it conveys can be cultural universals.

## Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Despite how much humans have in common, cultural differences are far more prevalent than cultural universals. For example, while all cultures have language, analysis of particular language structures and conversational etiquette reveal tremendous differences. In some Middle Eastern cultures, it is common to stand close to others in conversation. North Americans keep more distance, maintaining a large “personal space.” Even something as simple as eating and drinking varies greatly from culture to culture. If your professor comes into an early morning class holding a mug of liquid, what do you assume she is drinking? In the United States, it’s most likely filled with coffee, not Earl Grey tea, a favorite in England, or Yak Butter tea, a staple in Tibet.

The way cuisines vary across cultures fascinates many people. Some travelers, like celebrated food writer Anthony Bourdain, pride themselves on their willingness to try unfamiliar foods, while others return home expressing gratitude for their native culture’s fare. Canadians often express disgust at other cultures’ cuisine, thinking it is gross to eat meat from a dog or guinea pig, for example, while they do not question their own habit of eating cows or pigs. Such attitudes are an example of **ethnocentrism**, or evaluating and judging another culture based on how it compares to one’s own cultural norms. Ethnocentrism, as sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906) described the term, involves a belief or attitude that one’s own culture is better than all others. Almost everyone is a little bit ethnocentric. For example, Canadians tend to say that people from England drive on the “wrong” side of the road, rather than the “other” side. Someone from a country where dogs are considered dirty and unhygienic might find it off-putting to see a dog in a French restaurant.

A high level of appreciation for one’s own culture can be healthy; a shared sense of community pride, for example, connects people in a society. But ethnocentrism can lead to disdain or dislike for

other cultures, causing misunderstanding and conflict. People with the best intentions sometimes travel to a society to “help” its people, seeing them as uneducated or backward, essentially inferior. In reality, these travelers are guilty of cultural imperialism—the deliberate imposition of one’s own cultural values on another culture. Europe’s colonial expansion, begun in the 16th century, was often accompanied by a severe cultural imperialism. European colonizers often viewed the people in the lands they colonized as uncultured savages who were in need of European governance, dress, religion, and other cultural practices. On the West Coast of Canada, the aboriginal “potlatch” (gift-giving) ceremony was made illegal in 1885 because it was thought to prevent natives from acquiring the proper industriousness and respect for material goods required by civilization. A more modern example of **cultural imperialism** may include the work of international aid agencies who introduce modern technological agricultural methods and plant species from developed countries while overlooking indigenous varieties and agricultural approaches that are better suited to the particular region.

Ethnocentrism can be so strong that when confronted with all the differences of a new culture, one may experience disorientation and frustration. In sociology, we call this “**culture shock**.” A traveler from Chicago might find the nightly silence of rural Montana unsettling, not peaceful. An exchange student from China might be annoyed by the constant interruptions in class as other students ask questions—a practice that is considered rude in China. Perhaps the Chicago traveler was initially captivated with Montana’s quiet beauty and the Chinese student was originally excited to see an American-style classroom firsthand. But as they experience unanticipated differences from their own culture, their excitement gives way to discomfort and doubts about how to behave appropriately in the new situation. Eventually, as people learn more about a culture, they recover from culture shock.

Culture shock may appear because people aren’t always expecting cultural differences. Anthropologist Ken Barger (1971) discovered



this when conducting participatory observation in an Inuit community in the Canadian Arctic. Originally from Indiana, Barger hesitated when invited to join a local snowshoe race. He knew he'd never hold his own against these experts. Sure enough, he finished last, to his mortification. But the tribal members congratulated him, saying, "You really tried!" In Barger's own culture, he had learned to value victory. To the Inuit people, winning was enjoyable, but their culture valued survival skills essential to their environment: how hard someone tried could mean the difference between life and death. Over the course of his stay, Barger participated in caribou hunts, learned how to take shelter in winter storms, and sometimes went days with little or no food to share among tribal members. Trying hard and working together, two nonmaterial values, were indeed much more important than winning.

### *Exercise*

Can you recall an instance in which you experienced culture shock?



During his time with the Inuit, Barger learned to engage in cultural relativism. **Cultural relativism** is the practice of assessing a culture by its own standards rather than viewing it through the lens of one's own culture. The anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) argued that each culture has an internally consistent pattern of thought and action, which alone could be the basis for judging the merits and morality of the culture's practices. Cultural relativism requires an open mind and a willingness to consider, and even adapt to, new values and **norms**. However, indiscriminately embracing everything about a new culture is not always possible. Even the most culturally relativist people from egalitarian societies—ones in which women have political rights and control over their own bodies—would question whether the widespread practice of female genital mutilation in countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan should be accepted as a part of cultural tradition.

Sociologists attempting to engage in cultural relativism may struggle to reconcile aspects of their own culture with aspects of a culture they are studying. Pride in one's own culture doesn't have to lead to imposing its values on others. And an appreciation for another culture shouldn't preclude individuals from studying it with a critical eye.

Feminist sociology is particularly attuned to the way that most cultures present a male-dominated view of the world as if it were simply the view of the world. Androcentricism is a perspective in which male concerns, male attitudes, and male practices are presented as “normal” or define what is significant and valued in a culture. Women's experiences, activities, and contributions to society and history are ignored, devalued, or marginalized.

As a result the perspectives, concerns, and interests of only one sex and class are represented as general. Only one sex and class are directly and actively involved in producing, debating, and developing its ideas, in creating its art, in forming its medical and psychological conceptions, in framing its laws, its political principles, its educational

values and objectives. Thus a one-sided standpoint comes to be seen as natural, obvious, and general, and a one-sided set of interests preoccupy intellectual and creative work (Smith 1987).

In part this is simply a question of the bias of those who have the power to define cultural values, and in part, it is the result of a process in which women have been actively excluded from the culture-creating process. It is still common, for example, to use the personal pronoun “he” or the word “man” to represent people in general or humanity. Despite the good intentions of many who use these terms, and the grammatical awkwardness of trying to find gender neutral terms to replace “he” or “man,” the overall effect is to establish masculine values and imagery as normal. A “policeman” brings to mind a man who is doing a man’s job, when in fact women have been involved in policing for several decades now. Replacing “he” with “she” in a sentence can often have a jarring effect because it undermines the “naturalness” of the male perspective.

## Overcoming Culture Shock

During her summer vacation, Caitlin flew to Madrid to visit Maria, the exchange student she'd befriended the previous semester. In the airport, she heard rapid, musical Spanish being spoken all around her. Exciting as it was, she felt isolated and disconnected. Maria's mother kissed Caitlin on both cheeks when she greeted her. Her imposing father kept his distance. Caitlin was half asleep by the time supper was served—at 10 pm! Maria's family sat at the table for hours, speaking loudly, gesturing, and arguing about politics, a taboo dinner subject in Caitlin's house. They served wine and toasted their honoured guest. Caitlin had trouble interpreting her hosts' facial expressions, and didn't realize she should make the next toast. That night, Caitlin crawled into a strange bed, wishing she hadn't come. She missed her home and felt overwhelmed by the new customs, language, and surroundings. She'd studied Spanish in school for years—why hadn't it prepared her for this?

What Caitlin hadn't realized was that people depend not only on spoken words, but on subtle cues like gestures and facial expressions, to communicate. Cultural norms accompany even the smallest nonverbal signals (DuBois 1951). They help people know when to shake hands, where to sit, how to converse, and even when to laugh. We relate to others through a shared set

of cultural norms, and ordinarily, we take them for granted.

For this reason, culture shock is often associated with traveling abroad, although it can happen in one's own country, state, or even hometown. Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1960) is credited with first coining the term "culture shock." In his studies, Oberg found that most people found encountering a new culture to be exciting at first. But bit by bit, they became stressed by interacting with people from a different culture who spoke another language and used different regional expressions. There was new food to digest, new daily schedules to follow, and new rules of etiquette to learn. Living with this constant stress can make people feel incompetent and insecure. People react to frustration in a new culture, Oberg found, by initially rejecting it and glorifying one's own culture. An American visiting Italy might long for a "real" pizza or complain about the unsafe driving habits of Italians compared to people in the United States.

It helps to remember that culture is learned. Everyone is ethnocentric to an extent, and identifying with one's own country is natural.

Caitlin's shock was minor compared to that of her friends Dayar and Mahlika, a Turkish couple living in married student housing on campus. And it was nothing like that of her classmate Sanai. Sanai had been forced to flee war-torn Bosnia with her family when she was 15. After two weeks in Spain, Caitlin had developed a bit more compassion and understanding for what those people had gone through. She understood that adjusting

to a new culture takes time. It can take weeks or months to recover from culture shock, and years to fully adjust to living in a new culture.

By the end of Caitlin's trip, she'd made new lifelong friends. She'd stepped out of her comfort zone. She'd learned a lot about Spain, but she'd also discovered a lot about herself and her own culture.

## 33. Analysis of Relativism

<http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/eidos/n13/n13a09.pdf>

### **The current debate on relativism**

Today the theme of relativism is at the centre of attention not only in the philosophical sphere –and more particularly, which most interests us here, in contemporary analytical philosophy– but also in our public debate, in press organs, party offices, ecclesiastical hierarchies, etcetera.

In Italy (but the matter also concerns other western countries, as for instance the United States) for some time an intense press campaign has been going on within which the expression *relativism*, in its meta-ethical sense, has been used as a political weapon to discredit secular culture and the political forces that appeal to it –actually very weakly. *Being relativists* is in actual fact considered a sort of defamatory accusation, not only for those who make it but also for those who receive it and awkwardly endeavour to ward it off without ever entering into the content of the accusations.

The most serious thing, nevertheless, at least for those who ardently desire our public debate to move along tracks of correctness and transparency, is that in throwing out these attacks people entirely omit to specify the meaning attributed to the expression involved. The result of the ideological use made of it is to determine a more or less interested semantic overlap with other notions that are undoubtedly different (*skepticism*,  *nihilism*, *subjectivism*, *pluralism*).

The discussion on relativism takes a rather different course if instead we look at philosophical culture in the English language, with reference above all to the area of analytical philosophy, which will be the privileged field of reference in this paper. What is certain is that the debate on relativism is receiving a great deal of attention today, while previously there was a long period, from the 1950s to the 1970s, in which it was taken for granted that relativism had been



refuted once and for all. Caricature versions of relativistic positions were offered, presented in a totally pejorative and disparaging key, so much so that that few philosophers endeavoured to work out an explicit defence of relativism. Most of the people that expounded theses that might have had relativistic implications occupied a large part of their time in trying to avoid these consequences and defending themselves against this accusation<sup>1</sup>.

Until the 1960s, among scholars in the analytical area there was widespread awareness that cognitive relativism, at least in its most radical version, had been refuted once and for all by the most sophisticated versions of the traditional *argument from self-refutation*. I will return to this point subsequently. Here I am concerned with stressing that in the 1950s and 1960s the pathway of *cognitive relativism* having become an impossible one, it seemed to most people that the only acceptable version of relativism was the ethical one, specifically meaning *meta-ethical relativism*. From this point of view, there was awareness that this version could only flourish as a *specific* and absolutely *limited* form of relativism, sustainable insofar as it rested firmly on epistemological conceptions of an absolutistic and objectivistic type. The central idea, typical of the epistemological conception prevailing in those years (a sophisticated version of neo-positivism), was that factjudgements were *objective*, and represented a reality in themselves, while value-judgements were *subjective*, and were projections of emotions about and attitudes to reality<sup>2</sup>. Hence on the basis of the sharing of this dichotomous opposition between *objective factjudgements* and *subjective value-judgements* it was possible to maintain that *meta-ethical relativism* furnished a plausible characterization of the *subjectivity* of ethical judgments, while *metaphysical realism*<sup>3</sup> represented the basic framework inside which to justify the *objectivity* of fact-judgements.

Things started to change in the late 1970s. Studies began to appear, especially in the 1980s, which showed that relativism can rather easily avoid the attempts at refutation, to which end there is more than one argumentative strategy available. Secondly, at the

same time *constructivistic* and *anti-realistic* conceptions of knowledge began to develop, which in one way or another incorporated elements of a relativistic character. Through these developments, the relationship between meta-ethical relativism and the other more radical forms of relativism (cognitive and/or cultural) changed signs: cognitive and/or cultural relativism ended up representing the philosophical basis on which to found new versions of meta-ethical relativism, which were alternatives to those expressed in *emotivist* terms.

In more recent years relativism has tended to be placed, as I have already said, at the centre of discussions within analytical philosophy, especially in the disciplinary areas of epistemology, philosophy of language, cultural anthropology, cognitive sciences and moral philosophy. Some highly interesting monographs on this theme have recently appeared;<sup>4</sup> and there are also positions, at an epistemological level, expressing very radical relativism in a complete and consistent form.<sup>5</sup> Today relativism, regardless of whether or not one adheres to it, represents an essential challenge for absolutist and objectivist positions, which have been greatly refined in the critical confrontation with it. Moreover, there are some conceptions that seek to present themselves as being halfway between relativism and absolutism, and in doing so end up encompassing elements of a relativistic character.<sup>6</sup>

Hence it seems that things are going very well for relativism. So is all well? I am inclined to doubt this. The fact is that, in contrast with the preceding period, in which there was a *deflationary* situation concerning definitions, now instead, we are faced with an *inflationary* situation: that is to say, there is an *excess of definitions*, some uselessly *complicated*, others too *generic*, yet others too *specific*. Anyone who wants to undertake the invidious task of investigating relativism risks in short, losing the thread of the skein and not reaching an adequate overall vision. Today, in effect, relativism appears like a galaxy of conceptions that are projected into different spheres, and it proves rather difficult to trace the

connections between these conceptions and establish their confines.

In this paper first of all I have to set myself a task of conceptual simplification, seeking to grasp, at one and the same time, both the elements of unity and the elements of differentiation of the various relativistic conceptions. I will now explain how I will proceed in doing this. In the second section I will try to offer a *conceptual definition of relativism*, afterwards deriving its principal articulations (the *conceptions*), keeping in mind above all the various spheres in which these conceptions are present.

In the third section I will deal with some of the main difficulties that relativism comes up against, and therefore also with the criticisms made against it in the area of analytical philosophy.

Lastly, in the fourth section I will endeavour to answer the criticisms from my personal point of view and in doing so I will be concerned to present a *moderate version of relativism*.

To conclude this introductory section, it seems important to me to stress that an investigation of relativism is extremely important, at least indirectly, for the theme of the conference too. The fact is that if a relativistic perspective is adopted, then it will inevitably be necessary to reject the idea that a whole series of important notions within practical philosophy (for instance the notion of *person*, that of *the person's rights*, that of *rule of law*, etcetera, as they have been worked out in cultural contexts of the western type) can be justified in absolute and universal terms, outside the contexts in which they arose. This naturally does not mean that we do not have, first of all, to defend them and present them in their *best light*; and, secondly, to try to present them in contexts different from our own, even though in the form of inter-cultural dialogue and not of coercive imposition. In my opinion all this requires that the dialogue be concerned to show that these notions can also be considered important acquisitions from the point of view of cultural schemes that are different from our own.

### **A definition of relativism**

As we have seen, relativism today appears as a very complex and

ramified notion, which is proposed, moreover, in many different versions (*strong* and *weak*) and can be applied in various spheres. We find both very specific formulations of relativism and very general and comprehensive conceptions. Therefore it happens that one can be a relativist in a given sphere and not in others; and moreover that attempts are made to blend relativism and absolutism, giving rise to more or less successful *hybrids*.

The fact that relativism is such a complex notion, one of those that are usually defined as *essentially contested concepts*,<sup>7</sup> must not however induce us to stop using it, as is suggested by Rorty (1999, p. XIV), who believes that it lacks any sufficiently unitary character to be able to perform any explanatory or reconstructive function. I believe, on the contrary, that once it is appropriately redefined, this term captures something important that is common to a vast set of conceptions, and therefore can perform a useful clarifying function.

How can one proceed in the attempt to give a definition of it? Well, in all cases in which the *definiendum* is constituted by *essentially contested concepts*, some time ago I worked out and applied a model of definition that I have called *conceptual definition* (see my previous papers<sup>8</sup>). This is based on the scheme *concept/conceptions*, whose purpose, *minimal* but no less important, is –if any exist– to identify the *common conceptual basis*, the shared assumptions (*deemed certain*) by various conceptions, different from or even alternative to one another, concerning the same object. An important element of this definition is that of its ability to describe, at one and the same time, both the shared elements (the *concept*) and the elements of differentiation (namely, the *conceptions* as interpretations of the same concept) of an *essentially disputable* notion. This is a characteristic that proves very useful to us in speaking of relativism.

However, before proceeding to the definition it is useful to clarify a point. I said before that relativism has many faces and can express several conceptions. The reason for this is actually that relativism, rather than expressing –or being identified with– a single conception, is a *salient characteristic* of a group of conceptions that

can differ in content or disciplinary sphere. These are, however, conceptions that are classifiable as *relativistic* in that they possess that particular characteristic. In this sense, the objective of the conceptual definition of *relativism* that I am about to propose is precisely to identify this characteristic; and it is a characteristic that concerns the way in which affirmations, beliefs and criteria considered as *relative* have to be justified or validated. According to this definition we should consider as relativistic all those conceptions according to which

all the (*strong versions*) or at least a significant and large part (*weak versions*) of the criteria and beliefs of a cognitive, cultural, semantic, ethical or aesthetic, etc. character (according to the sphere referred to) depend on –and therefore are related to– a context (which can be a paradigm, a culture, a language, et cetera) chosen each time as a reference point; and this means that there is no position, point of view or parameter *outside any context* making it possible to effect a completely neutral evaluation of these elements, and therefore to make any affirmations in *absolute terms*<sup>9</sup>.

From this definition it is clear that precisely *absolutism* is the conception that is opposed to relativism; and here *absolutism* is taken to mean «that characteristic possessed by all those conceptions that deem it necessary to admit that a large part of the beliefs and the criteria mentioned above are valid independently of reference to a context».

This definition, although it is truly *minimal*, is however already able to provide some suitable tools for distinguishing relativism from all those notions (*skepticism, nihilism, anarchism, subjectivism, pluralism*) that are frequently confused with it.

There is not sufficient space for a more thorough analytical examination of the various notions and their relationships; therefore I will proceed in a very schematic way. First of all relativism, thus defined, is clearly distinguished from *skepticism*,<sup>10</sup>

that is to say from all those positions that strategically cast doubt on the *truth* or the *guaranteed assertibility* of affirmations or beliefs, in the various fields in which they are expressed. The latter positions are actually parasitical on absolutistic conceptions (Cf. Giorello, 2006, p. 230.), and do not express any points of view *in a positive sense* (Cf. Margolis, 1991, p. 7); from the epistemic point of view they serve to show that no genuine knowledge is given (Cf. O'Grady, 2002, pp. 91-92). None of all this happens with relativism: it always expresses some positions *in a positive sense*, and it is convinced that genuine knowledge, even though relative, can be expressed.

Secondly, relativism is distinguished from *nihilism* and *anarchism*, i.e. from the positions according to which, since there are no strong and objective criteria for choosing among beliefs, theories and evaluative options, then *anything goes*, in the sense that any criterion can be used, even in the absence of its being justified; in this way one would be unable to distinguish good cognitive strategies from bad ones. Relativism, by contrast, recognizes the presence of constraints and criteria that genuinely guide choices; it is simply that these are criteria belonging to a system of coordinates<sup>11</sup>.

In the third place, relativism is distinguished just as clearly from *subjectivism* (ethical), i.e. from all those meta-ethical positions that maintain that the source of validity of moral judgements lies in the last analysis in some characteristics of moral agents, taken individually. On this subject it must be said not only that relativistic conceptions do not logically imply any choice of a subjectivist character, but also that it is very difficult to construct a subjectivist version of relativism. For this would mean assuming that the context relative to has to be that of individual subject.

Lastly, relativism is distinguished from *pluralism* (ethical), i.e. from meta-ethical conceptions according to which the ultimate values of ethics are *plural*, and therefore irreducible to a single value, and can potentially be ordered in a hierarchical scale (in the *weak pluralism* version), or are not reducible to a common axiological hierarchy (in the *strong pluralism* version)<sup>12</sup>. In this case too there is

no relationship of logical implication between the two conceptions. The relativist can perfectly well be a pluralist from the meta-ethical point of view (indeed it is likely that this will be the case), and the pluralist can perfectly well be a relativist. The difference is that the pluralist can be an absolutist<sup>13</sup>, i.e. can believe that values belonging to different vital spheres are in any case absolute, while the relativist certainly cannot be one.

Starting from the conceptual definition illustrated above it is then possible to derive a varied series of conceptions, all of which can in some way be characterised as relativistic, precisely because they share the characteristic mentioned above. The task of making a detailed taxonomy of all the various positions that can be labelled in this way is extremely arduous, because the *trunk of relativism* has become highly ramified, and from the *principal branches* there have promptly developed *sprigs* that are even smaller. Here it is not possible to give an account of this complex network of distinctions and sub-distinctions. I will simply make a few brief considerations.

Possibly the best-known taxonomic scheme is the one introduced by Susan Haack (1996, pp. 297-315), according to which for purposes of classification the various versions of relativism derive from the juxtaposition of two selection criteria, relating to:

1. *What is relativized* (reference meaning, truth, forms of ontology, reality, epistemic criteria, moral values, et cetera).

2. *The context with reference to which the relativization is carried out* (language, conceptual scheme, theory, version of the world, culture, et cetera). The result is an excessively complicated chart, which besides does not adequately take into account the fact that many elements of the first series of criteria can be relativized to more than one element of the second series. Secondly, many distinctions within the two criteria are not at all clear: for instance, the distinction between language and conceptual schemes, reality and ontology, and so forth<sup>14</sup>.

This being the case, to me it certainly seems simpler and more economic, in particular for the purposes of this paper, to make first of all a distinction that separates two big spheres in which

relativistic positions can be placed, and then to identify, within them, some more specific spheres, within which to identify the various expressions of relativism.

The *first big sphere* is the *cognitive* one, which comprises all those conceptions that in any way have to do with the vast field of knowledge. Correlatively, *cognitive* relativism comprises all those theses that maintain, depending on the single cases (and following a descending order that goes from the strongest versions to the weakest ones, that do not logically imply one another), that the criteria concerning rationality of beliefs (*relativism about rationality*), the existence of objects (*ontological relativism*), the truth of affirmations (*relativism about truth*), epistemic evaluation of theories (*epistemic relativism*), the criteria of meaning of utterances (*semantic relativism*), et cetera, are always related to some system of coordinates, without there being an external standard of judgement allowing completely neutral comparison of any other with any other.

The *second big sphere* is the *evaluative* one, comprising all those conceptions that in any way have to do with the criteria to which our practical life is oriented. Correlatively, *evaluative* relativism comprises all those theses that maintain that the criteria presiding over the evaluation of *what is right or wrong* from the ethical point of view (*meta-ethical relativism*), or the evaluation of *what is beautiful or ugly* from the aesthetic point of view (*aesthetic relativism*), et cetera, are always related to some system of coordinates, without there ever existing a completely objective and neutral standard of evaluation in relation to competing evaluation criteria. On the subject of the ethical version of evaluative relativism it must be stressed, in agreement with the conceptual definition proposed above, that it identifies in relativism not a specific conception, but rather a characteristic relating to the mode of justification of beliefs and criteria. This type of relativism can only have a *meta-ethical* character, and therefore must necessarily concern not the *content* of the beliefs or the moral criteria but the *way of justifying them*.

To the various versions of relativism presented above we then



have to add that of *cultural relativism*, which does not fit into the preceding scheme, in that, if taken in its fullest and most radical form, it encompasses both versions. Indeed, if cultural relativism is accepted in a strong sense, then all beliefs and criteria, of whatever type, are to be considered as relative to a given culture.

### **Difficulties about relativism**

In this section I will deal with the most serious difficulties that relativistic conceptions have come up against – and still come up against. These difficulties are immediately highlighted by the criticisms made by *absolutist* adversaries. I will limit my analysis, as I have already said, to the area of analytical philosophy.

The most radical criticism, and historically the most salient, that has been made of relativism and still continues to be made, even though it has several times proved to be a blunt weapon, is that it is *self-refuting*<sup>15</sup>

It is not possible here, in the space of this essay, to give a detailed account of the innumerable versions in which this argument has been developed. The variety of these versions is enhanced on account of the modifications that relativists have adopted to their conceptions in response to the various attempts at refutation<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, relativistic conceptions have not presented themselves as a homogeneous block. Nevertheless, the argument has to be briefly considered, because of a rather serious difficulty for relativism that it brings to light. This becomes clear from the discussion that develops between relativists and their critics, on the subject of these accusations of inconsistency and/or of contradiction. It is a difficulty that perhaps constitutes the main philosophical source of all the criticisms, and that in my opinion is not satisfactorily resolved by the *standard* strategies that the relativists bring into play in response to the attempts at refutation.

For my present purposes it is sufficient to mention the fundamental structure of the argument<sup>17</sup>, which simply copies that of the *liar paradox*. The *absolutist* conceptions point out that, when the relativist expresses his fundamental conviction regarding the

necessary contextual dependence of criteria and beliefs, this affirmation can be interpreted in two ways: either it is true in all contexts, in which case the relativist's assertion is *self-refuting*; or it is only true in a relative way, and therefore it would be false from the point of view of the absolutist, and consequently the relativist would have no ground on which to attack absolutism.

In working out their strategies for responding to the various versions of this argument, the relativists have lingered on both horns of the dilemma, trying to find in *a positive sense*, within one or the other of the two alternatives, ways out of the impasse.

A *first type of solution* takes the second alternative seriously, attending to the fact that the relativist, consistently with the premises of his argument, should consider his thesis as *internal* to the conceptual scheme adopted by those who share it or to the cultural context of which it is a part. Accordingly it is itself a thesis that is also *relative* to that framework. In this sense, we would be talking about *second order relativism*<sup>18</sup>. Such relativism defends a thesis that is *self-referential* but not *self-refuting*: a thesis that would have nothing to oppose to the arguments of the absolutist, except the fact of constituting a defining proposal, alternative to that of the absolutist. The proposal applies to a whole series of key notions (*knowledge, truth, epistemic criterion, etcetera*), and it is considered to be true or at least rationally acceptable within a determined context<sup>19</sup>.

The *second type of solution* attends to the first alternative, but not, obviously, in the sense of reaffirming the absolute truth of the *thesis on relativity*, which once again would come up against the accusation of being a *self-refuting* affirmation. Rather, it does so in the sense of trying to identify, while remaining within a relativistic outlook, some affirmations that would be, in some sense, *true in all contexts*. In short, from this point of view, it would be a matter of constructing a *weaker version* of relativism that recognizes the need to incorporate some elements of an absolutist character in relativistic conceptions, and thus avoids the accusation of self-contradiction.

There are a great number of conceptions that have tried to break away from the *most radical* forms of relativism, to work out *more moderate* versions of it. But the biggest problem, for anyone attempting to trace out a map of them, is that such conceptions have done it in the most diverse ways, making reference each time to a disparate series of elements (of a structural, logical, anthropological, biological, et cetera, character) to be considered in some sense as *absolute*, or at any rate not *relative*.

It is obvious that here I cannot examine all these variations. These attempts, nevertheless, are extremely important for me, because they endeavour to face a real and profound philosophical difficulty about relativism, far beyond those of a logical character. It is a difficulty that the first type of solution fails to resolve, precisely because it chooses to shut itself up in a *quietistic manner*, and sometimes also in a sectarian manner<sup>20</sup>, inside its own conceptual scheme (in the case of different schemes present in the same culture) or inside its own culture, seen as a kind of *unscratchable monolith*<sup>21</sup>. This type of solution never tries to defend its own positions *on the outside* and to insert criteria of evaluation that would allow comparative judgements.

It should instead be possible, for a relativistic conception to defend its positions beyond its own boundaries and to find new followers. Thus it could dispose of a terrain that is –in some sense– *neutral*. Then it would be able to express its theses in a language that can then be comprehensible in –and translatable into– the various cultural contexts and the various conceptual scenarios in which this thesis can get a hearing<sup>22</sup>. In relation to this, one would also like it to be possible, for the relativist too, to express, in ways and forms to be determined, judgments on what is *right* or *wrong* from the ethical point of view, at least in relation to behaviours of people belonging to different cultures than our own, or at any rate having different conceptions than our own. It should also be possible to pass judgements in terms of *greater or lesser explanatory correctness*, if one really does not want to use the word *truth*, as concerns conceptual schemes, theories and visions of the world

different than our own. And one would like to be able to do this, even limiting oneself to some fundamental points, without undermining the fundamental premises of a picture that would substantially be relativistic.

I am personally convinced that the moderate versions do well to highlight the seriousness of this problem, and also to list a series of elements that it is objectively difficult to consider as *radically relative* to specific contexts. My opinion, nevertheless, is that if these elements were identified as real *absolutes*, then the relativistic conceptions would fatally turn into absolutist conceptions and nothing more. They would thus lose the consistency, the explanatory force, and I would also say the provocative vivacity of the original formulations. They degenerate into what is – sometimes – a sort of confused mixture in which relativistic affirmations would end up sounding banal and obvious.

I believe, however, that fortunately there is an alternative way to consider these elements assumed to be absolutes while remaining within a relativistic position, which I will try to show in the next section. For the moment it is appropriate to start from examination of these elements as they are configured by the moderate versions of relativism. To simplify a picture that is extremely complex, I will try very briefly to isolate three types of characteristics that according to the moderate relativistic theories constitute true *universals*. These amount to a sort of *common core*<sup>23</sup> made up of elements that we have to suppose to be shared by all schemes or all cultures<sup>24</sup>. It is a *common core*, we must be careful to specify, that is then combined in various ways with differences, even very big ones, linked to the reference contexts.

The *first characteristic* concerns elements that we could call *structural*, because they do not concern contents, but on the contrary *the principles, the forms and the criteria of reasoning*. Many scholars have striven to isolate these elements, in different ways and forms, making reference each time, alternatively or cumulatively, to the fields of formal logic, theories of truth and theories of rationality. A particularly perspicuous way to express

this moderate form of relativism is to say that there are some universal principles that represent a *core conception* of rationality, a sort of *minimal theory of universal rationality* (O'Grady, 2002, pp. 128, 140). They comprise at least the *principle of non-contradiction*, the *principle of consistency between beliefs* (and therefore of the search for inferential connections between them), and the *principle of the search for proof or evidence* (of whatever type they may be) to support their own beliefs (O'Grady, 2002, pp. 140-142). Others add further aspects to the picture like, for instance, "the use of theories in the explanation, prediction and control of events" (Horton, 1982, pp. 256-257).

The *second characteristic* concerns some *ontological* aspects, and hence some aspects of the world, as we represent it to ourselves. The controlled versions maintain that this "relationship with the world" necessarily implies some stable elements of the objects that make it up, without which it would be totally impossible to interact with – and to get our bearings on – the world itself. It implies, for instance, that objects are persistent and recurrent, of different types and of different kinds (Hampshire, 1960, pp. 15-18); it also implies that the objects most familiar to us are solid, lasting, of average size, connected in a chance fashion, and spatially identifiable, human beings included<sup>25</sup>.

The *third characteristic* concerns some *bio-anthropological* aspects that the moderate versions affirm to be common to all human beings, to whatever community they belong. From this point of view it is stressed that human beings *share the same biological make up* (Baghranian, 2004, p. 262), and more specifically share elements of a genetic, biological and psychological character, which help to trace out their *common animality* (Baghranian, 2004, p. 267). These elements concern the phenomenon of mortality, experiences of pleasure and pain, the ability to love and to hate, etc. (Baghranian, 2004, p. 288), phenomena that, I will add, can also very well constitute the *naturalistic basis of ethics*. From a strictly epistemological point of view, however, there is a preference to highlight the fact that at all historical and geographical latitudes,

human beings have the same cerebral organs and the same sense organs and manifest substantial uniformity as regards the working of these same organs. This would constitute a rather strong constraint against excessive proliferation of very different beliefs<sup>26</sup>. An important feature of this uniformity in our working organisms, which some particularly stress<sup>27</sup>, is that there seems to be a sort of *innate sense of comparative similarity*, probably acquired on an evolutionary base, without which we could not learn any type of language or develop processes of induction and prediction.

### **An alternative solution to the difficulties:**

#### ***frameworks and environment***

It is not possible here, if only for reasons of space, to enter into the merit of these –presumed– *logical, ontological and bio-anthropological universals*, in order to verify whether they really are such. Personally I doubt that some of them are, even assuming that one start from the perspective of those people that recognize them as such (one can consider, for instance, the element of the *use of theories in explanation...*). But that is not the important point to stress. For the fact is that it is not at all clear, in many of the authors that maintain moderate relativistic positions or in-between positions, whether they hold these elements to be *necessarily* absolute and universal elements, with *objective* value, or consider them as elements within schemes or cultures but *contingently* common to them all. If first hypothesis holds good, then the difference between absolutism and relativism would collapse. We would be faced with forms of disguised absolutism. Let us remember that a fundamental assumption, making it possible to characterize a position as relativistic, is that one cannot make any type of affirmation that is wholly un-contextual. Saying the same thing with the words of the constructivists, it is not possible to get outside one's own schemes, and to speak about the world independently of a scheme of description (Goodman, 1988, pp. 3-8).

The alternative hypothesis is that these elements are internal to some reference context. On that hypothesis it would still be possible to label these positions as relativistic, but it would be necessary to

clarify better the nature and the scope of these common elements. There is more promising position available, that rigorously remains inside relativistic coordinates, and that enables one to produce a sketch of an anti-absolutist explanation of the common presence of these elements. They are, after all, elements whose presence it seems to be impossible to deny.

The position that I am about to present has for the moment an absolutely embryonic form, but it is one which I believe to be worth developing further. It seeks to satisfy two demands: i) The first demand is to explain that the elements shared by all schemes have an *internal* character, that is the character of materials that have to be interpreted in the light of some reference picture, of a part of these elements shared by all schemes. ii) The second demand is that one clarify in what sense it is possible to speak, in a relativistic picture, of a reality which is –in some sense– *objective*, serving as a common basis for all schemes.

The *first demand* is satisfied by postulating a distinction between *single schemes or cultures* on one side and *long-term background frameworks* on the other. This is a distinction that seems very important to me, but which has not yet been sufficiently echoed in relativistic conceptions<sup>28</sup>. Single schemes and specific cultures are the ordinary reference contexts for specifically local and in a sense *idiosyncratic* beliefs (those that, for instance, help to determine ethical conceptions –even competing ones– prevailing in a certain cultural context). As these beliefs or convictions become more and more general and shared in more than one community (for instance, those relating to a certain liberal conception of the human person, or of democracy, those relating to some very general ethical principles, such as *prohibition of torture*, or to the recognition of some fundamental human rights, et cetera), the schemes and the local cultures progressively tend to lean on broader conceptual pictures (*frameworks*). These frameworks can belong to several schemes and cultures. A broader framework of this kind, for instance, is represented by what can conventionally be defined as *western culture*, which certainly encompasses a very big variety

of schemes or more specific cultures, but also has some common coordinates. Subsequently the frameworks tend to broaden, to the extent that they encompass in the extreme case, *all humanity* or, one might also say, *the history of civilized man*. This is so in cases in which reference is made to the demands and characteristics that we know to be most stable and most fundamental in human beings, which are the ones characterized above, improperly, as *logical universals* and as *bio-anthropological universals*.

It should be clarified that, postulating the existence of these frameworks, we have not foregone any of the essential aspects of relativism. The elements mentioned above do not belong to a sort of *reality in itself*, the outfit of a metaphysically structured human nature which we simply take stock of. They are always the result of an interpretative and selective action of ours on the world, which is wholly unaware<sup>29</sup> as regards the most stable and fundamental elements. For these are the fruit of the categories that are incorporated in learning our first language; and our language, starting from ordinary language, is never neutral. It always incorporates theories<sup>30</sup> whose common presuppositions (certain standardized ways of configuring the *furniture of the world*, for example in the terms of *objects of average size, manageable*, et cetera) also depend on components of our nervous system. They are transmitted in an evolutionary way (and have been preserved because they have been successful), and are suitable *through innatism* for representing the world in the way which is most appropriate to our needs<sup>31</sup>.

These frameworks are always in the background of our schemes and our local cultures, often in a wholly unacknowledged way. One must explain this using the following analogy. To adopt a scheme or share a culture is like selecting an icon in our computer, and thereby working on a specific program, but on a hard disk on which there are many other programs, and above all on which there is a single operating system.

The relationship between schemes and frameworks is not static, but dynamic, and it permits a whole series of operations, for



instance criticism of our own and other people's schemes and our own and other people's cultures, which are not available for the radical relativist. The fact is that the contents of the single schemes or the single cultures can be examined and criticized by having recourse to elements taken from the broadest frameworks. One can think about the background ideas of *person* and *democracy* present in a framework, in that they are used as elements for critically examining the way in which the single schemes or single cultures are concretely used. It is a *holistic* process, for the understanding of which (but it is only a suggestion) the model of *imperfect reflective equilibrium*<sup>32</sup> could be very useful.

The *second demand* that we would need to safeguard concerns the possibility of maintaining the idea of a reality that is in some sense *objective* within a rigorously relativistic context. This becomes possible by developing another distinction that I consider as important as the previous one, between *environment* and *world*<sup>33</sup>. The first of the two terms refers to what can be considered for all human beings as the *common source of sensory inputs* and the *common reference point of non verbal transactions and interactions*. According to this first meaning it is correct to say, even for a relativist, that an environment only exists in a *pre-linguistic* sense (and therefore is logically prior to every type of interpretation).

The second term refers to *the world as an object of linguistic and/or theoretical representation*. According to this first meaning it is correct to say, from a relativistic and constructivist point of view, that *several worlds exist*, and more exactly as many versions of the world as there prove to be after our conceptual schemes begin to work<sup>34</sup>.

It is important to notice that through this type of distinction relativistic conceptions can recover an acceptable, though *minimal*<sup>35</sup>, sense of realism, which can be characterised as *practical*<sup>36</sup> or *pragmatic*<sup>37</sup> realism.

I would have liked, at this point, to develop a last part, which would have concerned the possible uses and applications of relativistic theses –seen in a sympathetic way– in the sphere of

legal and political philosophy. Unfortunately there is not time to do this. In any case, a project of the kind would have at least to touch on the points of the *relativistic ethical justification of legal positivism*, the *relationship between relativism and democracy*, and the *particularism of human rights*<sup>38</sup>, if they are interpreted in a relativistic key.

<sup>1</sup> This situation is well described by Swoyer (1982, p. 84).

<sup>2</sup> This thesis is central to my *Costruttivismo e teorie del diritto* (1999), to which the reader is referred for further details.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase was coined, as is well known, by Putnam (1985, p. 57).

<sup>4</sup> I refer in particular to the volumes by Baghranian (2004); O'Grady (2002); and Harre & Krausz (1996).

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking, for example, of the works of Stich (1996), and Margolis (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Of the various in-between positions, here it is important to mention the one expressed by Putnam, at least in *Verità, ragione e storia*; and the one expressed by Toulmin (1972).

<sup>7</sup> For this notion the *locus classicus* is the paper by Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts" (1955-1956, p. 167-198). But another important reference point is Hurley's essay, "Objectivity and Disagreement" (1985, pp. 66-73, 81-91).

<sup>8</sup> See in particular *Il positivismo giuridico: metodi teorie e giudizi di valore* (Villa, 2004, pp. 18-20).

<sup>9</sup> This definition derives from an elaboration of those provided by Baghranian (2004, p. 1), and Krausz (1989, p. 1). Also partially convergent are the definitions given by Mandelbaum, (1982, p. 35).

<sup>10</sup> This definition, which appears very clear to me, is not adequately taken into account by Giovanni Jervis, who it seems to me sometimes tends to confuse the two notions (Cf. Jervis, 2005, pp. 35-36).

<sup>11</sup> Among scholars that clearly distinguish between anarchism and relativism I would like to mention Stich (1996, pp. 43-44).

<sup>12</sup> I borrow these definitions of *pluralism* from Barberis (2004, pp. 4-17).

<sup>13</sup> For example, the conception of Bruno Celano is at once *objectivistic* (there are objective ethical values) and *pluralistic* (there exists an irreducible plurality of values) (Cf. Celano, 2005, pp. 161-183).

<sup>14</sup> Here I quote the criticisms of Baghramian (2004, pp. 6-7).

<sup>15</sup> One of the most recent and sophisticated attempts to develop this argument is by Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: a Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (1987).

<sup>16</sup> Krausz (1989, p. 2) insists on this point.

<sup>17</sup> For a more in-depth discussion, see the works by Mandelbaum (1982, pp. 3461), Baghramian (2004, pp. 132-136), and Harré & M. Krausz (1996, pp. 26-28).

<sup>18</sup> Baghramian (2004, p. 9) characterises this position in this way.

<sup>19</sup> For example, this is the proposal of the *strong programme* on sociology of knowledge developed in the last few decades by Barry Barnes & David Bloor (1982, pp. 21-47). This answer is then further elaborated, in more sophisticated terms, by Hesse (1980, pp. 29-60).

<sup>20</sup> The accusation is formulated by Jervis (2005, pp. 115 ff).

<sup>21</sup> The expression was coined by Aime (2006, pp. 76 ff), who very appropriately points out this difficulty.

<sup>22</sup> The need to possess a *form of thought not relativised to our specific system of beliefs* is very well expressed by Williams (1982, p. 184). See also Harré & Krausz (1996, 26-27).

<sup>23</sup> This expression, actually very much in vogue in the jargon of linguists and anthropologists, is correctly used to distinguish positions that, precisely, are convinced of the presence of these universals. From this point of view a major influence has been exerted by the use made of it by Horton (1982, pp. 256-257).

<sup>24</sup> Actually there is an even more minimal version than the one I will now examine of the position that inserts universalistic elements in a relativistic picture. It is the version graphically represented by Robert Nozick through the figure of the *relaxed relativist*. According

to him, the only non-relative assertion that he is willing to recognise is precisely that *all truths are relative* (Cf. Nozick, 2001, pp. 15-16).

<sup>25</sup> To these elements of an ontological character there is supposed to correspond, at a theoretical-linguistic level, a sort of *primary theory* which would be substantially identical in all cultures (Cf. Horton, 1982, p. 228).

<sup>26</sup> I discuss this *biological constraint* in my *Costruttivismo e teorie del diritto* (Villa, 1999, pp.116-117).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. in particular Willard van Orman Quine, who uses this element to maintain that the problem of the indeterminacy of radical translation can in practice be overcome (Cf. Quine, 1984, pp. 293-296).

<sup>28</sup> Some mention of a position of the kind can be found in Harre & Krausz (1996, pp. 28, 64-65), where, however, reference is made to «introducing absolute elements\* (p. 67).

<sup>29</sup> In this sense I really cannot understand why Paul Boghossian, in criticizing constructivist conceptions, insists that according to these positions reality is socially constructed in an *always intentional way* (Boghossian, 2006, p. 16).

<sup>30</sup> On the constructive role of the categories of our earliest speech some fundamental pages were written by Whorf (1993, pp. 211-221).

<sup>31</sup> The thesis of the evolutionary character and basic innatism of some components of our central nervous system is very persuasively developed by Horton (1982, pp. 232-236).

<sup>32</sup> I particularly refer here to the sophisticated version of the model of *imperfect reflexive equilibrium* worked out by Elgin (1996, pp. 102-128).

<sup>33</sup> I develop this distinction more at length in my *Costruttivismo e teorie del diritto* (Villa, 1999, pp. 125-131), to which the reader is referred for further details.

<sup>34</sup> A distinction of the kind is hinted at by Harre and Krausz when they differentiate the *modest* conception of *single barrelled realism*, according to which the *world as it is* plays an essential role in the genesis of knowledge, though not as an *object of representation*,

but only in a *regulative* key (research implies that there is an independent material world) from the conception of *double barrelled realism*, that is to say that of the *world to which our affirmations correspond*, a notion that is used instead in a *criteriological* key. The authors naturally opt for the first notion (Cf. Harre & Krausz, 1996, pp. 101-102, 125-126).

<sup>35</sup> This expression is used by Margolis (1986, pp. 93, 101-103, 158, 175, 201-202).

<sup>36</sup> Practical realism is discussed by Hacking (1987, pp. 32-33).

<sup>37</sup> Pragmatic realism is discussed by Putnam (1988, pp. 113-114).

<sup>38</sup> "Particularism of rights" is discussed by Baccelli (1999).

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# 34. Egoism

## ETHICAL EGOISM

1. **Common-sense Egoism:** According to this view, egoism is a vice. It involves putting one's own concerns over those of others. One's behavior is egoistic if it involves putting one's own interests over those of others to an immoderate degree.
2. **Psychological Egoism**
  1. **Argument For:** Human agents always, at least on a deep-down level, are all egoists insofar as our behavior, explainable in terms of our beliefs and desires, is always aimed at what we believe is our greatest good (Baier, 1991, p. 203).
  2. **Objection:** The psychological egoist confuses egoistic desires with motivation. An agent may act contrary to his desires and what is in his own best interest. People often act in ways that they know are detrimental to their well being. Moreover, what one most wants may not be in their own self-interest (e.g., giving money to Amnesty International rather than buying a new CD). MacKinnon adds that, "Even if it were shown that we *often* act for the sake of our own interest, this is not enough to prove that psychological egoism is true. According to this theory, we must show that people *always* act to promote their own interests" (p. 23). If we can find only one counterexample to psychological egoism, then it is not true.

### 3. **Egoism as a Means to the Common Good**

1. **Argument For:** According to the economist, Adam Smith, when entrepreneurs are unimpeded by legal or self-imposed moral constraint to protect the good of others, they are able to promote their own good and, as a result, provide the most efficient means of promoting the good of others (Baier, 1991, p. 201; see MacKinnon, p. 24). Such a view leads to the doctrine that, “if each pursues her own interest as she conceives of it, then the interest of everyone is promoted” (Baier, 1991, p. 200).
2. **Objection:** Apart from positing an “invisible hand” guiding the market processes, the common-good egoist makes the fallacy, ascribed to J.S. Mill, that if each person promotes her own interest, then everyone else’s interests are thereby promoted. “Clearly, this is a fallacy, for the interests of different individuals or classes may, and under certain conditions (of which the scarcity of necessities is the most obvious), do conflict. Then the interest of one is the detriment of the other” (Baier, 1991, p. 200).

### 4. **Rational Egoism:** Rational egoism is concerned with reasonable action.

1. **Strong Rational Egoism:** It is always rational to aim at one’s own greatest good, and never rational not to do so (Baier, 1991, p. 201).
2. **Weak Rational Egoism:** It is always rational to aim at one’s own greatest good, but not necessarily never rational not to do so (Baier, 1991, p. 201).
3. **Argument For:** When doing something does not *prima facie* appear to be in our interest, our doing

said act requires that we justify our action by showing that it is in our interest, thereby justifying our action.

4. **Objection:** Such an approach to justifying actions in our own interest may be abused if we do not have criteria established to determine what the interests of agents amount to. If such criteria are established, such actions may be reasonable so long as they do not result in conflicts between agents. In such cases, creative middle ways are called for.
5. **Ethical Egoism:** Coupled with ethical rationalism—"the doctrine that if a moral requirement or recommendation is to be sound or acceptable, complying with it must be in accordance with reason"—rational egoism implies ethical egoism (Baier, 1991, p. 201).
  1. **Strong Ethical Egoism:** It is always right to aim at one's own greatest good, and never right not to do so (Baier, 1991, p. 201).
  2. **Weak Ethical Egoism:** It is always right to aim at one's own greatest good, but not necessarily never right not to do so (Baier, 1991, p. 201).
  3. **Argument For:** If we accept rational egoism, and if we accept ethical rationalism, then we must accept ethical egoism. This is the case because if acting in one's own self-interest is reasonable, then it is a moral requirement that one acts in one's own self-interest.
  4. **Objection:** Ethical egoism is incompatible with ethical conflict-regulation. Consider the following example from Kurt Baier, regarding the problem over whether it would be morally wrong for me to kill my grandfather so that he will be unable to change his

will and disinherit me (1991, p. 202):

Assuming that my killing him will be in my best interest but detrimental to my grandfather, while refraining from killing him will be to my detriment but in my grandfather's interest, then if ethical conflict-regulation is sound, there can be a sound moral guideline regulating this conflict (presumably by forbidding this killing). But then ethical egoism cannot be sound, for it precludes the interpersonally authoritative regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest, since such a regulation implies that conduct contrary to one's interest is sometimes *morally required* of one, and conduct in one's best interest is sometimes morally forbidden to one. Thus, ethical egoism is incompatible with ethical conflict-regulation.

References: Baier, Kurt. 1991 "Egoism" in a Companion to Ethics. (ed. P. Singer) Oxford: Blackwell, 197-204.

## 35. Altruism



**Altruism** (also called the **ethic of altruism**, **moralistic altruism**, and **ethical altruism**) is an [ethical doctrine](#) that holds that the [moral](#) value of an individual's actions depend solely on the impact on other individuals, regardless of the consequences on the individual itself. [James Fieser](#) states the altruist dictum as: "An action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the agent."<sup>[1]</sup> [Auguste Comte](#)'s version of altruism calls for living for the sake of others. One who holds to either of these ethics is known as an "altruist."

The word "altruism" (French, *altruisme*, from *autrui*: "other people", derived from Latin *alter*: "other") was coined by [Auguste Comte](#), the French founder of [positivism](#), in order to describe the ethical doctrine he supported. He believed that individuals had a [moral obligation](#) to renounce self-interest and live for others. Comte says, in his *Catéchisme Positiviste*,<sup>[2]</sup> that:

[The] social point of view cannot tolerate the notion of rights, for such notion rests on individualism. We are born under a load of obligations of every kind, to our predecessors, to our successors, to our contemporaries. After our birth these obligations increase or accumulate, for

it is some time before we can return any service.... This [“to live for others”], the definitive formula of human morality, gives a direct sanction exclusively to our instincts of benevolence, the common source of happiness and duty. [Man must serve] Humanity, whose we are entirely.”

The [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) says that for Comte’s altruism, “The first principle of morality...is the regulative supremacy of social sympathy over the self-regarding instincts.”<sup>[3]</sup> Author Gabriel Moran, (professor in the department of Humanities and the Social Sciences, New York University) says “The law and duty of life in altruism [for Comte] was summed up in the phrase: Live for others.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Various [philosophers](#) define the doctrine in various ways, but all definitions generally revolve around a moral obligation to benefit others or the pronouncement of moral value in serving others rather than oneself. Philosopher [C. D. Broad](#) defines altruism as “the doctrine that each of us has a special obligation to benefit others.”<sup>[5]</sup> Philosopher W. G. Maclagan defines it as “a duty to relieve the distress and promote the happiness of our fellows...Altruism is to...maintain quite simply that a man may and should discount altogether his own pleasure or happiness as such when he is deciding what course of action to pursue.”<sup>[6]</sup>

## As consequentialist ethics

Altruism is often seen as a form of [consequentialism](#), as it indicates that an action is ethically right if it brings good consequences to others. Altruism may be seen as similar to [utilitarianism](#), however an essential difference is that the latter prescribes acts that maximize good consequences for all of society, while altruism prescribes maximizing good consequences for everyone except the actor. Spencer argued that since the rest of society will almost always

outnumber the utilitarian, a genuine utilitarian will inevitably end up practicing altruism or a form of altruism.<sup>[7]</sup> [Effective altruism](#) is a philosophy and social movement that maintains that the consequences of our actions – for ourselves and others – are important, and seeks to maximise the overall quality of these consequences.

## Criticisms

[Friedrich Nietzsche](#) held that the idea that to treat others as more important than oneself is degrading and demeaning to the self. He also believed that the idea that others have a higher value than oneself hinders the individual's pursuit of self-development, excellence, and creativity.<sup>[8]</sup> However, he did assert a “duty” to help those who are weaker than oneself.<sup>[9]</sup>

[David Kelley](#), discussing [Ayn Rand](#)'s views, says that “there is no rational ground for asserting that sacrificing yourself in order to serve others is morally superior to pursuing your own (long-term, rational) self-interest. Altruism ultimately depends on non-rational ‘rationales,’ on mysticism in some form...” Furthermore, he holds that there is a danger of the state enforcing that moral ideal: “If self-sacrifice is an ideal – if service to others is the highest, most honorable course of action – why not force people to act accordingly?” He believes this can ultimately result in the state forcing everyone into a [collectivist](#) political system.<sup>[10]</sup><sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Norwegian eco-philosopher [Arne Næss](#) argues that environmental action based upon altruism – or service of the other – stems from a shrunken “egoic” concept of the self. Self-actualization will result, he argues, in the recovery of an “[ecological self](#)”, in which actions formerly seen as altruistic are in reality a form of [enlightened self-interest](#).<sup>[11]</sup>

German philosopher [Max Scheler](#) distinguishes two different ways in which the strong can help the weak, one which is an

expression of love, “motivated by a powerful feeling of security, strength, and inner salvation, of the invincible fullness of one’s own life and existence”<sup>[12]</sup> and another which is merely “one of the many modern substitutes for love, ... nothing but the urge to turn away from oneself and to lose oneself in other people’s business.”<sup>[13]</sup> At its worst, Scheler says, “love for the small, the poor, the weak, and the oppressed is really disguised hatred, repressed envy, an impulse to detract, etc., directed against the opposite phenomena: wealth, strength, power, largesse.”<sup>[14]</sup>



## 36. Divine Command Theory (Part 1)

**Divine command theory** (also known as **theological voluntarism**)<sup>[1][2]</sup> is a [meta-ethical](#) theory which proposes that an action's status as [morally](#) good is equivalent to whether it is commanded by [God](#). The theory asserts that what is moral is determined by what God commands, and that for a person to be moral is to follow his commands. Followers of both monotheistic and polytheistic religions in ancient and modern times have often accepted the importance of God's commands in establishing morality. Numerous variants of the theory have been presented: historically, figures including [Saint Augustine](#), [Duns Scotus](#), and [Thomas Aquinas](#) have presented various versions of divine command theory; more recently, [Robert Merrihew Adams](#) has proposed a "modified divine command theory" based on the [omnibenevolence](#) of God in which morality is linked to human conceptions of right and wrong. Paul Copan has argued in favour of the theory from a Christian viewpoint, and Linda Zagzebski's divine motivation theory proposes that God's motivations, rather than commands, are the source of morality.

Semantic challenges to divine command theory have been proposed; the philosopher William Wainwright argued that to be commanded by God and to be morally obligatory do not have an identical meaning, which he believed would make defining obligation difficult. He also contended that, as knowledge of God is required for morality by divine command theory, [atheists](#) and [agnostics](#) could not be moral; he saw this as a weakness of the theory. Others have challenged the theory on [modal](#) grounds by arguing that, even if God's command and morality correlate in this world, they may not do so in other possible worlds. In addition, the [Euthyphro dilemma](#), first proposed by [Plato](#), presented a dilemma

which threatened either to leave morality subject to the whims of God, or challenge his omnipotence. Divine command theory has also been criticised for its apparent incompatibility with the omnibenevolence of God, moral [autonomy](#) and [religious pluralism](#), although some scholars have attempted to defend the theory from these challenges.

## 37. Divine Command Theory (Part 2)

Various forms of divine command theory have been presented by philosophers including [William of Ockham](#), [St Augustine](#), [Duns Scotus](#), and [John Calvin](#). The theory generally teaches that moral truth does not exist independently of [God](#) and that morality is determined by divine commands. Stronger versions of the theory assert that God's command is the only reason that a good action is moral, while weaker variations cast divine command as a vital component within a greater reason.<sup>[3]</sup> The theory asserts that good actions are morally good as a result of their being commanded by God, and many [religious believers](#) subscribe to some form of divine command theory.<sup>[4]</sup> Because of these premises, adherents believe that moral obligation is obedience to God's commands; what is morally right is what God desires.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Augustine

[Saint Augustine](#) offered a version of divine command theory that began by casting ethics as the pursuit of the supreme good, which delivers human happiness. He argued that to achieve this happiness, humans must love objects that are worthy of human love in the correct manner; this requires humans to love God, which then allows them to correctly love everything else. Augustine's ethics proposed that the act of loving God enables humans to properly orient their loves, leading to human happiness and fulfilment.<sup>[6]</sup> Augustine supported [Plato's](#) view that a well-ordered soul is a desirable consequence of morality; unlike Plato, he believed that achieving a well-ordered soul had a higher purpose: living in

accordance with God's commands. His view of morality was thus heteronomous, as he believed in deference to a higher authority (God), rather than acting [autonomously](#).<sup>[7]</sup>

## Scholasticism

John Duns Scotus, who proposed a variant of divine command theory

[Scholastic](#) philosopher [John Duns Scotus](#) argued that the only moral obligations that God could not take away from humans are to love one another and love God. He proposed that some commandments are moral because God commands them, and some are moral irrespective of his command.<sup>[8]</sup> Duns Scotus argued that the natural law contains only what is self-evidently [analytically true](#) and that God could not make these statements false. This means that the commands of natural law do not depend on God's will; these commands were those found on the first tablet of the [Ten Commandments](#) – the first three, which consist of obligations to God. He suggested that the rest of the Ten Commandments, and any other commandments God makes, are morally obligatory because God commands them.<sup>[9]</sup>

Kelly James Clark and Anne Poortenga have presented a defence of divine command theory based on [Aquinas'](#) moral theory. Aquinas proposed a theory of [natural law](#) which asserted that something is moral if it works towards the purpose of human existence, and so human nature can determine what is moral. Clark and Poortenga argued that God created human nature and thus commanded a certain morality; hence he cannot arbitrarily change what is right or wrong for humans.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Immanuel Kant

The [deontological ethics](#) of [Immanuel Kant](#) has been cast as rejecting divine command theory by several figures, among whom is ethicist [R. M. Hare](#). Kant's view that morality should be determined by the [categorical imperative](#) – duty to the moral law, rather than acting for a specific end – has been viewed as incompatible with divine command theory. Philosopher and theologian [John E. Hare](#) has noted that some philosophers see divine command theory as an example of Kant's [heteronomous will](#) – motives besides the moral law, which Kant regarded as non-moral.<sup>[11]</sup> American philosopher [Lewis White Beck](#) takes Kant's argument to be a refutation of the theory that morality depends of divine authority.<sup>[12]</sup> John E. Hare challenges this view, arguing that [Kantian ethics](#) should be seen as compatible with divine command theory.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Robert Adams

Robert Merrihew Adams proposes what he calls a “modified divine command theory”

American philosopher [Robert Merrihew Adams](#) proposes what he calls a “modified divine command theory”.<sup>[13]</sup> Adams presents the basic form of his theory by asserting that two statements are equivalent:

1. It is wrong to do X.
2. It is contrary to God's commands to do X.<sup>[13]</sup>

He proposes that God's commands precurse moral truths and must be explained in terms of moral truths, not the other way around. Adams writes that his theory is an attempt to define what being ethically ‘wrong’ consists of and accepts that it is only useful to

those within a [Judeo-Christian](#) context. In dealing with the criticism that a seemingly immoral act would be obligatory if God commanded it, he proposes that God does not command cruelty for its own sake. Adams does not propose that it would be logically impossible for God to command cruelty, rather that it would be unthinkable for him to do so because of his nature. Adams emphasises the importance of [faith](#) in God, specifically faith in God's goodness, as well as his existence.<sup>[14]</sup>

Adams proposes that an action is morally wrong [if and only if](#) it defies the commands of a loving God. If cruelty was commanded, he would not be loving; Adams argued that, in this instance, God's commands would not have to be obeyed and also that his theory of ethical wrongness would break down. He proposed that divine command morality assumes that human concepts of right and wrong are met by God's commands and that the theory can only be applied if this is the case.<sup>[15]</sup> Adams' theory attempts to counter the challenge that morality might be arbitrary, as moral commands are not based solely on the commands of God, but are founded on his [omnibenevolence](#). It attempts to challenge the claim that an external standard of morality prevents God from being sovereign by making him the source of morality and his character the moral law.<sup>[16]</sup>

Adams proposes that in many Judeo-Christian contexts, the term 'wrong' is used to mean being contrary to God's commands. In ethical contexts, he believes that 'wrong' [entails](#) an [emotional](#) attitude against an action and that these two uses of wrongness usually correlate.<sup>[17]</sup> Adams suggests that a believer's concept of morality is founded in their religious belief and that right and wrong are tied to their belief in God; this works because God always commands what believers accept to be right. If God commanded what a believer perceived as wrong, the believer would not say it is right or wrong to disobey him; rather their concept of morality would break down.<sup>[18]</sup>

Michael Austin writes that an implication of this modified divine command theory is that God cannot command cruelty for its own

sake; this could be argued to be inconsistent with God's omnipotence. Thomas Aquinas argued that God's omnipotence should be understood as the ability to do all things that are possible: he attempted to refute the idea that God's inability to perform illogical actions challenges his omnipotence. Austin contends that commanding cruelty for its own sake is not illogical, so is not covered by Aquinas' defence, although Aquinas had argued that sin is the falling short of a perfect action and thus not compatible with omnipotence.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Alternative theories

[Paul Copan](#) argues from a Christian viewpoint that man, made in God's image, conforms to God's sense of morality. The description of actions as right or wrong are therefore relevant to God; a person's sense of what is right or wrong corresponds to God's.<sup>[19]</sup>

We would not know goodness without God's endowing us with a moral constitution. We have rights, dignity, freedom, and responsibility because God has designed us this way. In this, we reflect God's moral goodness as His image-bearers.  
– PAUL COPAN, PASSIONATE CONVICTION: CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES ON CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS<sup>[19]</sup>

As an alternative to divine command theory, Linda Zagzebski has proposed divine motivation theory, which stills fits into a monotheistic framework. According to this theory, goodness is determined by God's motives, rather than by what he commands. Divine motivation theory is similar to [virtue ethics](#) because it considers the character of an agent, and whether they are in accordance with God's, as the standard for moral value.<sup>[20]</sup> Zagzebski argues that things in the world have objective moral properties, such as being lovable, which are given to them through God's perception of them. God's attitude towards something is cast

as a morally good attitude.<sup>[21]</sup> The theory casts God as a good example for morality, and humans should imitate his virtues as much as is possible for finite, imperfect beings.<sup>[22]</sup>



## 38. Utilitarianism



### What is utilitarianism?

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.

### How does utilitarian reasoning operate?

Early utilitarian thinkers sought to 'scientize' ethical decision-making. They developed a 'calculus' comparable to a modern cost/

benefit analysis. This calculus weighed the consequences of an action in terms of its impact on all the *sentient* beings that might be affected. Sentient beings feel pain or pleasure, so the calculus could consider the effect an action might have on animals as well as humans.

The calculus took into account several factors, such as

- The number of humans and animals that would benefit
- The number of humans and animals that would be harmed
- How intense any resulting pleasure would be
- How long any resulting pleasure might last
- How intense any resulting pain would be
- How long any resulting pain might last

While such a calculus for resolving ethical problems may seem idealized, utilitarian thinking coincided with a genuine desire to eliminate unnecessary suffering through seeking to answer the question, “Which option will serve the greater good?”

Utilitarianism stressed equality and fights against self-interest on the part of the ethical actor. As an illustration, let’s say you’ve volunteered to buy the paint for the fence that you and your three bordering neighbors share. The fence has to be painted one color: brown or white. You prefer white but your neighbors want brown. If you used a utilitarian approach, you would buy brown paint because three outnumbers one. Just because you are buying the paint does not give you any more weight in the decision.

## How has utilitarian reasoning been applied?

Utilitarian thinking led to many reforms. It helped bring an end to the mistreatment of animals, orphans and child laborers, as well as to the harsh treatment of adult laborers, prisoners, the poor, and the mentally ill. It provided arguments for abolishing slavery and for eliminating inequalities between the sexes. For John Stuart Mill, one

of the founders of the theory, both logic and morality dictated that one person's happiness should count as much as another person's happiness. This principle was applied to people whether they were wealthy or poor, powerful or weak.

Today few people think an ethical calculus can tell us exactly how competing interests should be weighed. But the more general utilitarian approach to ethical reasoning is still immensely influential. The principle that each person's happiness should be as important as any other person's happiness requires a society to make decisions in which the interests of all its members are considered in a balanced, rational fashion.

We can see utilitarianism in action in many public health efforts. For example, children in public schools are required to receive certain vaccinations. This is mandatory because of the results: keeping people healthy and the greater good: individuals may object to the vaccinations, but the law focuses on the greater good for the greatest number.

## What is the main weakness of utilitarianism?

The utilitarian principle says that people should act to promote overall happiness, but this principle appears to justify using people in ways that do not respect the idea that individual rights may not be violated. That is, the utilitarian approach seems to imply that it would be ethical to inflict pain on one person if that action results in a net increase in happiness.

Here is a classic question that is posed to expose this potential weakness in the utilitarian approach to ethical reasoning: Why not kill and harvest the organs of one healthy person in order to save five patients who will go on to live happy lives?

The philosopher William James argued that it would be a “hideous...thing” if “millions [were] kept permanently happy on the

one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture,” but that situation would seem consistent with utilitarianism (James, 1891, n.p.).

James’s scenario inspired a short story by Ursula Le Guin, “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas,” in which the happiness of a society depends upon the suffering of one child. Some members of this society are unable to live with this fact and “walk away from Omelas.”

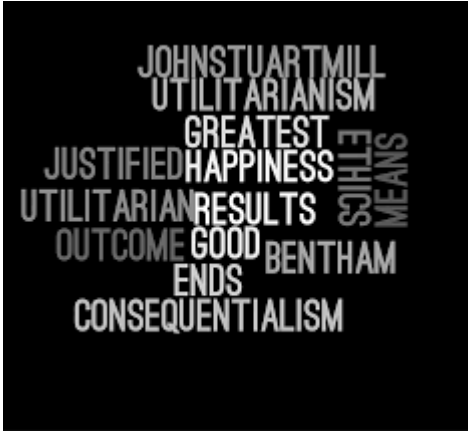
Utilitarian’s emphasis on consequences can also be a weakness. That emphasis can lead to “all’s well that ends well” thinking, allowing people to justify immoral acts if the outcome is beneficial. One must also ask, can we ever be sure of the consequences of our actions? If we take an action that we expected would have good consequences, but it ends up harming people, have we behaved unethically regardless of our intentions?

## 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?

## 39. John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism



### UTILITARIANISM

GENERAL REMARKS. There are few circumstances among those which make up the present condition of human knowledge, more unlike what might have been expected, or more significant of the backward state in which speculation on the most important subjects still lingers, than the little progress which has been made in the decision of the controversy respecting the criterion of right and wrong. From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the

same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras, and asserted (if Plato's dialogue be grounded on a real conversation) the theory of utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called sophist.

It is true that similar confusion and uncertainty, and in some cases similar discordance, exist respecting the first principles of all the sciences, not excepting that which is deemed the most certain of them, mathematics; without much impairing, generally indeed without impairing at all, the trustworthiness of the conclusions of those sciences. An apparent anomaly, the explanation of which is, that the detailed doctrines of a science are not usually deduced from, nor depend for their evidence upon, what are called its first principles. Were it not so, there would be no science more precarious, or whose conclusions were more insufficiently made out, than algebra; which derives none of its certainty from what are commonly taught to learners as its elements, since these, as laid down by some of its most eminent teachers, are as full of fictions as English law, and of mysteries as theology. The truths which are ultimately accepted as the first principles of a science, are really the last results of metaphysical analysis, practised on the elementary notions with which the science is conversant; and their relation to the science is not that of foundations to an edifice, but of roots to a tree, which may perform their office equally well though they be never dug down to and exposed to light. But though in science the particular truths precede the general theory, the contrary might be expected to be the case with a practical art, such as morals or legislation. All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and colour from the end to which they are subservient. When we engage in a pursuit, a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing would seem to be the first thing we need, instead of the last we are to look forward to. A test of right and wrong must be the means,

one would think, of ascertaining what is right or wrong, and not a consequence of having already ascertained it.

The difficulty is not avoided by having recourse to the popular theory of a natural faculty, a sense or instinct, informing us of right and wrong. For—besides that the existence of such a moral instinct is itself one of the matters in dispute—those believers in it who have any pretensions to philosophy, have been obliged to abandon the idea that it discerns what is right or wrong in the particular case in hand, as our other senses discern the sight or sound actually present. Our moral faculty, according to all those of its interpreters who are entitled to the name of thinkers, supplies us only with the general principles of moral judgments; it is a branch of our reason, not of our sensitive faculty; and must be looked to for the abstract doctrines of morality, not for perception of it in the concrete. The intuitive, no less than what may be termed the inductive, school of ethics, insists on the necessity of general laws. They both agree that the morality of an individual action is not a question of direct perception, but of the application of a law to an individual case. They recognise also, to a great extent, the same moral laws; but differ as to their evidence, and the source from which they derive their authority. According to the one opinion, the principles of morals are evident *à priori*, requiring nothing to command assent, except that the meaning of the terms be understood. According to the other doctrine, right and wrong, as well as truth and falsehood, are questions of observation and experience. But both hold equally that morality must be deduced from principles; and the intuitive school affirm as strongly as the inductive, that there is a science of morals. Yet they seldom attempt to make out a list of the *à priori* principles which are to serve as the premises of the science; still more rarely do they make any effort to reduce those various principles to one first principle, or common ground of obligation. They either assume the ordinary precepts of morals as of *à priori* authority, or they lay down as the common groundwork of those maxims, some generality much less obviously authoritative than the maxims themselves, and which has never succeeded in gaining

popular acceptance. Yet to support their pretensions there ought either to be some one fundamental principle or law, at the root of all morality, or if there be several, there should be a determinate order of precedence among them; and the one principle, or the rule for deciding between the various principles when they conflict, ought to be self-evident.

To inquire how far the bad effects of this deficiency have been mitigated in practice, or to what extent the moral beliefs of mankind have been vitiated or made uncertain by the absence of any distinct recognition of an ultimate standard, would imply a complete survey and criticism of past and present ethical doctrine. It would, however, be easy to show that whatever steadiness or consistency these moral beliefs have attained, has been mainly due to the tacit influence of a standard not recognised. Although the non-existence of an acknowledged first principle has made ethics not so much a guide as a consecration of men's actual sentiments, still, as men's sentiments, both of favour and of aversion, are greatly influenced by what they suppose to be the effects of things upon their happiness, the principle of utility, or as Bentham latterly called it, the greatest happiness principle, has had a large share in forming the moral doctrines even of those who most scornfully reject its authority. Nor is there any school of thought which refuses to admit that the influence of actions on happiness is a most material and even predominant consideration in many of the details of morals, however unwilling to acknowledge it as the fundamental principle of morality, and the source of moral obligation. I might go much further, and say that to all those *à priori* moralists who deem it necessary to argue at all, utilitarian arguments are indispensable. It is not my present purpose to criticise these thinkers; but I cannot help referring, for illustration, to a systematic treatise by one of the most illustrious of them, the *Metaphysics of Ethics*, by Kant. This remarkable man, whose system of thought will long remain one of the landmarks in the history of philosophical speculation, does, in the treatise in question, lay down an universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation; it is this:—'So act, that the



rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings.' But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the *consequences* of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.

On the present occasion, I shall, without further discussion of the other theories, attempt to contribute something towards the understanding and appreciation of the Utilitarian or Happiness theory, and towards such proof as it is susceptible of. It is evident that this cannot be proof in the ordinary and popular meaning of the term. Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof. Whatever can be proved to be good, must be so by being shown to be a means to something admitted to be good without proof. The medical art is proved to be good, by its conducing to health; but how is it possible to prove that health is good? The art of music is good, for the reason, among others, that it produces pleasure; but what proof is it possible to give that pleasure is good? If, then, it is asserted that there is a comprehensive formula, including all things which are in themselves good, and that whatever else is good, is not so as an end, but as a mean, the formula may be accepted or rejected, but is not a subject of what is commonly understood by proof. We are not, however, to infer that its acceptance or rejection must depend on blind impulse, or arbitrary choice. There is a larger meaning of the word proof, in which this question is as amenable to it as any other of the disputed questions of philosophy. The subject is within the cognizance of the rational faculty; and neither does that faculty deal with it solely in the way of intuition. Considerations may be presented capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof.

We shall examine presently of what nature are these considerations; in what manner they apply to the case, and what rational grounds, therefore, can be given for accepting or rejecting

the utilitarian formula. But it is a preliminary condition of rational acceptance or rejection, that the formula should be correctly understood. I believe that the very imperfect notion ordinarily formed of its meaning, is the chief obstacle which impedes its reception; and that could it be cleared, even from only the grosser misconceptions, the question would be greatly simplified, and a large proportion of its difficulties removed. Before, therefore, I attempt to enter into the philosophical grounds which can be given for assenting to the utilitarian standard, I shall offer some illustrations of the doctrine itself; with the view of showing more clearly what it is, distinguishing it from what it is not, and disposing of such of the practical objections to it as either originate in, or are closely connected with, mistaken interpretations of its meaning. Having thus prepared the ground, I shall afterwards endeavour to throw such light as I can upon the question, considered as one of philosophical theory.

## 40. John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism "What Utilitarianism Is"

### WHAT UTILITARIANISM IS

A passing remark is all that needs be given to the ignorant blunder of supposing that those who stand up for utility as the test of right and wrong, use the term in that restricted and merely colloquial sense in which utility is opposed to pleasure. An apology is due to the philosophical opponents of utilitarianism, for even the momentary appearance of confounding them with any one capable of so absurd a misconception; which is the more extraordinary, inasmuch as the contrary accusation, of referring everything to pleasure, and that too in its grossest form, is another of the common charges against utilitarianism: and, as has been pointedly remarked by an able writer, the same sort of persons, and often the very same persons, denounce the theory "as impracticably dry when the word utility precedes the word pleasure, and as too practicably voluptuous when the word pleasure precedes the word utility." Those who know anything about the matter are aware that every writer, from Epicurus to Bentham, who maintained the theory of utility, meant by it, not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain; and instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, have always declared that the useful means these, among other things. Yet the common herd, including the herd of writers, not only in newspapers and periodicals, but in books of weight and pretension, are perpetually falling into this shallow mistake. Having caught up the word utilitarian, while knowing

nothing whatever about it but its sound, they habitually express by it the rejection, or the neglect, of pleasure in some of its forms; of beauty, of ornament, or of amusement. Nor is the term thus ignorantly misapplied solely in disparagement, but occasionally in compliment; as though it implied superiority to frivolity and the mere pleasures of the moment. And this perverted use is the only one in which the word is popularly known, and the one from which the new generation are acquiring their sole notion of its meaning. Those who introduced the word, but who had for many years discontinued it as a distinctive appellation, may well feel themselves called upon to resume it, if by doing so they can hope to contribute anything towards rescuing it from this utter degradation.<sup>[A]</sup>

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders

of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included. But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect; of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, &c., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he, for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute

it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable; we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them. Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness—that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior—confounds the two very different ideas, of happiness, and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly-endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. 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 because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between

bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good. It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable



sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.

I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according

to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.

Against this doctrine, however, arises another class of objectors, who say that happiness, in any form, cannot be the rational purpose of human life and action; because, in the first place, it is unattainable: and they contemptuously ask, What right hast thou to be happy? a question which Mr. Carlyle clenches by the addition, What right, a short time ago, hadst thou even to *be*? Next, they say, that men can do *without* happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and could not have become noble but by learning the lesson of Entsagen, or renunciation; which lesson, thoroughly learnt and submitted to, they affirm to be the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue.

The first of these objections would go to the root of the matter were it well founded; for if no happiness is to be had at all by human beings, the attainment of it cannot be the end of morality, or of any rational conduct. Though, even in that case, something might still be said for the utilitarian theory; since utility includes not solely the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness; and if the former aim be chimerical, there will be all the greater scope and more imperative need for the latter, so long at least as mankind think fit to live, and do not take refuge in the simultaneous act of suicide recommended under certain conditions by Novalis. When, however, it is thus positively asserted to be impossible that human life should be happy, the assertion, if not something like a verbal quibble, is at least an exaggeration. If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who

have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture, but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all.

The objectors perhaps may doubt whether human beings, if taught to consider happiness as the end of life, would be satisfied with such a moderate share of it. But great numbers of mankind have been satisfied with much less. The main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquillity, and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain. There is assuredly no inherent impossibility in enabling even the mass of mankind to unite both; since the two are so far from being incompatible that they are in natural alliance, the prolongation of either being a preparation for, and exciting a wish for, the other. It is only those in whom indolence amounts to a vice, that do not desire excitement after an interval of repose; it is only those in whom the need of excitement is a disease, that feel the tranquillity which follows excitement dull and insipid, instead of pleasurable in direct proportion to the excitement which preceded it. When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be

terminated by death: while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth and health. Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory, is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind—I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties—finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind past and present, and their prospects in the future. It is possible, indeed, to become indifferent to all this, and that too without having exhausted a thousandth part of it; but only when one has had from the beginning no moral or human interest in these things, and has sought in them only the gratification of curiosity.

Now there is absolutely no reason in the nature of things why an amount of mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in these objects of contemplation, should not be the inheritance of every one born in a civilized country. As little is there an inherent necessity that any human being should be a selfish egotist, devoid of every feeling or care but those which centre in his own miserable individuality. Something far superior to this is sufficiently common even now, to give ample earnest of what the human species may be made. Genuine private affections, and a sincere interest in the public good, are possible, though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought-up human being. In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, every one who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; and unless such a person, through bad laws, or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escape the positive evils of life, the

great sources of physical and mental suffering—such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection. The main stress of the problem lies, therefore, in the contest with these calamities, from which it is a rare good fortune entirely to escape; which, as things now are, cannot be obviated, and often cannot be in any material degree mitigated. Yet no one whose opinion deserves a moment's consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits. Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society, combined with the good sense and providence of individuals. Even that most intractable of enemies, disease, may be indefinitely reduced in dimensions by good physical and moral education, and proper control of noxious influences; while the progress of science holds out a promise for the future of still more direct conquests over this detestable foe. And every advance in that direction relieves us from some, not only of the chances which cut short our own lives, but, what concerns us still more, which deprive us of those in whom our happiness is wrapt up. As for vicissitudes of fortune, and other disappointments connected with worldly circumstances, these are principally the effect either of gross imprudence, of ill-regulated desires, or of bad or imperfect social institutions. All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow—though a long succession of generations will perish in the breach before the conquest is completed, and this world becomes all that, if will and knowledge were not wanting, it might easily be made—yet every mind sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part, however small and unobscure, in the endeavour, will draw a noble enjoyment from the contest itself, which he would not for any bribe in the form of selfish indulgence consent to be without.

And this leads to the true estimation of what is said by the objectors concerning the possibility, and the obligation, of learning

to do without happiness. Unquestionably it is possible to do without happiness; it is done involuntarily by nineteen-twentieths of mankind, even in those parts of our present world which are least deep in barbarism; and it often has to be done voluntarily by the hero or the martyr, for the sake of something which he prizes more than his individual happiness. But this something, what is it, unless the happiness of others, or some of the requisites of happiness? It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this self-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that it would earn for others immunity from similar sacrifices? Would it be made, if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no fruit for any of his fellow creatures, but to make their lot like his, and place them also in the condition of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men *can* do, but assuredly not an example of what they *should*.

Though it is only in a very imperfect state of the world's arrangements that any one can best serve the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of his own, yet so long as the world is in that imperfect state, I fully acknowledge that the readiness to make such a sacrifice is the highest virtue which can be found in man. I will add, that in this condition of the world, paradoxical as the assertion may be, the conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of realizing such happiness as is attainable. For nothing except that consciousness can raise a person above the chances of life, by making him feel that, let fate and fortune do their worst, they have not power to subdue him: which, once felt, frees him from excess of anxiety concerning the evils of life, and enables

him, like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman Empire, to cultivate in tranquillity the sources of satisfaction accessible to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration, any more than about their inevitable end.

Meanwhile, let utilitarians never cease to claim the morality of self-devotion as a possession which belongs by as good a right to them, as either to the Stoic or to the Transcendentalist. The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds, is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness, of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind.

I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes: so that not only he may be unable

to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence. If the impugnors of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it: what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates.

The objectors to utilitarianism cannot always be charged with representing it in a discreditable light. On the contrary, those among them who entertain anything like a just idea of its disinterested character, sometimes find fault with its standard as being too high for humanity. They say it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and to confound the rule of action with the motive of it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them; but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety-nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other motives, and rightly so done, if the rule of duty does not condemn them. It is the more unjust to utilitarianism that this particular misapprehension should be made a ground of objection to it, inasmuch as utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble: he who betrays the friend that trusts him, is guilty of a crime, even if his object be to serve another friend to whom he



is under greater obligations.<sup>[B]</sup> But to speak only of actions done from the motive of duty, and in direct obedience to principle: it is a misapprehension of the utilitarian mode of thought, to conceive it as implying that people should fix their minds upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large. The great majority of good actions are intended, not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up; and the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except so far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights—that is, the legitimate and authorized expectations—of any one else. The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words, to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to. Those alone the influence of whose actions extends to society in general, need concern themselves habitually about so large an object. In the case of abstinences indeed—of things which people forbear to do, from moral considerations, though the consequences in the particular case might be beneficial—it would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not to be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practised generally, would be generally injurious, and that this is the ground of the obligation to abstain from it. The amount of regard for the public interest implied in this recognition, is no greater than is demanded by every system of morals; for they all enjoin to abstain from whatever is manifestly pernicious to society.

The same considerations dispose of another reproach against the doctrine of utility, founded on a still grosser misconception of the purpose of a standard of morality, and of the very meaning of the words right and wrong. It is often affirmed that utilitarianism renders men cold and unsympathizing; that it chills their moral

feelings towards individuals; that it makes them regard only the dry and hard consideration of the consequences of actions, not taking into their moral estimate the qualities from which those actions emanate. If the assertion means that they do not allow their judgment respecting the rightness or wrongness of an action to be influenced by their opinion of the qualities of the person who does it, this is a complaint not against utilitarianism, but against having any standard of morality at all; for certainly no known ethical standard decides an action to be good or bad because it is done by a good or a bad man, still less because done by an amiable, a brave, or a benevolent man or the contrary. These considerations are relevant, not to the estimation of actions, but of persons; and there is nothing in the utilitarian theory inconsistent with the fact that there are other things which interest us in persons besides the rightness and wrongness of their actions. The Stoics, indeed, with the paradoxical misuse of language which was part of their system, and by which they strove to raise themselves above all concern about anything but virtue, were fond of saying that he who has that has everything; that he, and only he, is rich, is beautiful, is a king. But no claim of this description is made for the virtuous man by the utilitarian doctrine. Utilitarians are quite aware that there are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue, and are perfectly willing to allow to all of them their full worth. They are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blameable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise. When this is apparent in any particular case, it modifies their estimation, not certainly of the act, but of the agent. I grant that they are, notwithstanding, of opinion, that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions; and resolutely refuse to consider any mental disposition as good, of which the predominant tendency is to produce bad conduct. This makes them unpopular with many people; but it is an unpopularity which they must share with every one who regards the distinction between right and wrong in a serious light; and the reproach is not one which a conscientious utilitarian need be anxious to repel.

If no more be meant by the objection than that many utilitarians look on the morality of actions, as measured by the utilitarian standard, with too exclusive a regard, and do not lay sufficient stress upon the other beauties of character which go towards making a human being loveable or admirable, this may be admitted. Utilitarians who have cultivated their moral feelings, but not their sympathies nor their artistic perceptions, do fall into this mistake; and so do all other moralists under the same conditions. What can be said in excuse for other moralists is equally available for them, namely, that if there is to be any error, it is better that it should be on that side. As a matter of fact, we may affirm that among utilitarians as among adherents of other systems, there is every imaginable degree of rigidity and of laxity in the application of their standard: some are even puritanically rigorous, while others are as indulgent as can possibly be desired by sinner or by sentimentalist. But on the whole, a doctrine which brings prominently forward the interest that mankind have in the repression and prevention of conduct which violates the moral law, is likely to be inferior to no other in turning the sanctions of opinion against such violations. It is true, the question, What does violate the moral law? is one on which those who recognise different standards of morality are likely now and then to differ. But difference of opinion on moral questions was not first introduced into the world by utilitarianism, while that doctrine does supply, if not always an easy, at all events a tangible and intelligible mode of deciding such differences.

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It may not be superfluous to notice a few more of the common misapprehensions of utilitarian ethics, even those which are so obvious and gross that it might appear impossible for any person of candour and intelligence to fall into them: since persons, even of considerable mental endowments, often give themselves so little trouble to understand the bearings of any opinion against which they entertain a prejudice, and men are in general so little conscious

of this voluntary ignorance as a defect, that the vulgarest misunderstandings of ethical doctrines are continually met with in the deliberate writings of persons of the greatest pretensions both to high principle and to philosophy. We not uncommonly hear the doctrine of utility inveighed against as a *godless doctrine*. If it be necessary to say anything at all against so mere an assumption, we may say that the question depends upon what idea we have formed of the moral character of the Deity. If it be a true belief that God desires, above all things, the happiness of his creatures, and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other. If it be meant that utilitarianism does not recognise the revealed will of God as the supreme law of morals, I answer, that an utilitarian who believes in the perfect goodness and wisdom of God, necessarily believes that whatever God has thought fit to reveal on the subject of morals, must fulfil the requirements of utility in a supreme degree. But others besides utilitarians have been of opinion that the Christian revelation was intended, and is fitted, to inform the hearts and minds of mankind with a spirit which should enable them to find for themselves what is right, and incline them to do it when found, rather than to tell them, except in a very general way, what it is: and that we need a doctrine of ethics, carefully followed out, to *interpret* to us the will of God. Whether this opinion is correct or not, it is superfluous here to discuss; since whatever aid religion, either natural or revealed, can afford to ethical investigation, is as open to the utilitarian moralist as to any other. He can use it as the testimony of God to the usefulness or hurtfulness of any given course of action, by as good a right as others can use it for the indication of a transcendental law, having no connexion with usefulness or with happiness.

Again, Utility is often summarily stigmatized as an immoral doctrine by giving it the name of Expediency, and taking advantage of the popular use of that term to contrast it with Principle. But the Expedient, in the sense in which it is opposed to the Right, generally means that which is expedient for the particular interest

of the agent himself: as when a minister sacrifices the interest of his country to keep himself in place. When it means anything better than this, it means that which is expedient for some immediate object, some temporary purpose, but which violates a rule whose observance is expedient in a much higher degree. The Expedient, in this sense, instead of being the same thing with the useful, is a branch of the hurtful. Thus, it would often be expedient, for the purpose of getting over some momentary embarrassment, or attaining some object immediately useful to ourselves or others, to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity, is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth, does that much towards weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilisation, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends; we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency, is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of a convenience to himself or to some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other's word, acts the part of one of their worst enemies. Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions, is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact (as of information from a male-factor, or of bad news from a person dangerously ill) would preserve some one (especially a person other than oneself) from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial. But in order that the exception may not extend itself beyond the need, and may have the least possible effect in weakening reliance on veracity, it ought to be recognized, and, if possible, its limits defined; and if the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good

for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another, and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates.

Again, defenders of utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this—that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness. This is exactly as if any one were to say that it is impossible to guide our conduct by Christianity, because there is not time, on every occasion on which anything has to be done, to read through the Old and New Testaments. The answer to the objection is, that there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions; on which experience all the prudence, as well as all the morality of life, is dependent. People talk as if the commencement of this course of experience had hitherto been put off, and as if, at the moment when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of another, he had to begin considering for the first time whether murder and theft are injurious to human happiness. Even then I do not think that he would find the question very puzzling; but, at all events, the matter is now done to his hand. It is truly a whimsical supposition, that if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful, and would take no measures for having their notions on the subject taught to the young, and enforced by law and opinion. There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill, if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it, but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better. That philosophers might easily do this, even now, on many subjects; that the received code of ethics is by no means of divine right; and that mankind have still much to learn as to the effects

of actions on the general happiness, I admit, or rather, earnestly maintain. The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement, and, in a progressive state of the human mind, their improvement is perpetually going on. But to consider the rules of morality as improvable, is one thing; to pass over the intermediate generalizations entirely, and endeavour to test each individual action directly by the first principle, is another. It is a strange notion that the acknowledgment of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones. To inform a traveller respecting the place of his ultimate destination, is not to forbid the use of landmarks and direction-posts on the way. The proposition that happiness is the end and aim of morality, does not mean that no road ought to be laid down to that goal, or that persons going thither should not be advised to take one direction rather than another. Men really ought to leave off talking a kind of nonsense on this subject, which they would neither talk nor listen to on other matters of practical concernment. Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanack. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong, as well as on many of the far more difficult questions of wise and foolish. And this, as long as foresight is a human quality, it is to be presumed they will continue to do. Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by: the impossibility of doing without them, being common to all systems, can afford no argument against any one in particular: but gravely to argue as if no such secondary principles could be had, and as if mankind had remained till now, and always must remain, without drawing any general conclusions from the experience of human life, is as high a pitch, I think, as absurdity has ever reached in philosophical controversy.

The remainder of the stock arguments against utilitarianism

mostly consist in laying to its charge the common infirmities of human nature, and the general difficulties which embarrass conscientious persons in shaping their course through life. We are told that an utilitarian will be apt to make his own particular case an exception to moral rules, and, when under temptation, will see an utility in the breach of a rule, greater than he will see in its observance. But is utility the only creed which is able to furnish us with excuses for evil doing, and means of cheating our own conscience? They are afforded in abundance by all doctrines which recognise as a fact in morals the existence of conflicting considerations; which all doctrines do, that have been believed by sane persons. It is not the fault of any creed, but of the complicated nature of human affairs, that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions, and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable. There is no ethical creed which does not temper the rigidity of its laws, by giving a certain latitude, under the moral responsibility of the agent, for accommodation to peculiarities of circumstances; and under every creed, at the opening thus made, self-deception and dishonest casuistry get in. There exists no moral system under which there do not arise unequivocal cases of conflicting obligation. These are the real difficulties, the knotty points both in the theory of ethics, and in the conscientious guidance of personal conduct. They are overcome practically with greater or with less success according to the intellect and virtue of the individual; but it can hardly be pretended that any one will be the less qualified for dealing with them, from possessing an ultimate standard to which conflicting rights and duties can be referred. If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible. Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is better than none at all: while in other systems, the moral laws all claiming independent authority, there is no common umpire entitled to interfere between them; their claims to precedence one over another rest on little better than sophistry,



and unless determined, as they generally are, by the unacknowledged influence of considerations of utility, afford a free scope for the action of personal desires and partialities. We must remember that only in these cases of conflict between secondary principles is it requisite that first principles should be appealed to. There is no case of moral obligation in which some secondary principle is not involved; and if only one, there can seldom be any real doubt which one it is, in the mind of any person by whom the principle itself is recognized.

FOOTNOTES:

[\[A\]](#)

The author of this essay has reason for believing himself to be the first person who brought the word utilitarian into use. He did not invent it, but adopted it from a passing expression in Mr. Galt's *Annals of the Parish*. After using it as a designation for several years, he and others abandoned it from a growing dislike to anything resembling a badge or watchword of sectarian distinction. But as a name for one single opinion, not a set of opinions—to denote the recognition of utility as a standard, not any particular way of applying it—the term supplies a want in the language, and offers, in many cases, a convenient mode of avoiding tiresome circumlocution.

[\[B\]](#)

An opponent, whose intellectual and moral fairness it is a pleasure to acknowledge (the Rev. J. Llewellyn Davis), has objected to this passage, saying, "Surely the rightness or wrongness of saving a man from drowning does depend very much upon the motive with which it is done. Suppose that a tyrant, when his enemy jumped into the sea to escape from him, saved him from drowning simply in order that he might inflict upon him more exquisite tortures, would it tend to clearness to speak of that rescue as 'a morally right action?' Or suppose again, according to one of the stock illustrations of ethical inquiries, that a man betrayed a trust received from a friend,

because the discharge of it would fatally injure that friend himself or some one belonging to him, would utilitarianism compel one to call the betrayal 'a crime' as much as if it had been done from the meanest motive?"

I submit, that he who saves another from drowning in order to kill him by torture afterwards, does not differ only in motive from him who does the same thing from duty or benevolence; the act itself is different. The rescue of the man is, in the case supposed, only the necessary first step of an act far more atrocious than leaving him to drown would have been. Had Mr. Davis said, "The rightness or wrongness of saving a man from drowning does depend very much"—not upon the motive, but—"upon the *intention*" no utilitarian would have differed from him. Mr. Davis, by an oversight too common not to be quite venial, has in this case confounded the very different ideas of Motive and Intention. There is no point which utilitarian thinkers (and Bentham pre-eminently) have taken more pains to illustrate than this. The morality of the action depends entirely upon the intention—that is, upon what the agent *wills to do*. But the motive, that is, the feeling which makes him will so to do, when it makes no difference in the act, makes none in the morality: though it makes a great difference in our moral estimation of the agent, especially if it indicates a good or a bad habitual *disposition*—a bent of character from which useful, or from which hurtful actions are likely to arise.

# 4I. Act and Rule Utilitarianism

## Philosophical Ethics: Rule and Act Utilitarianism

By: [Peter Prevos](#) on 1 November 2004.

The ethical theory of utilitarianism, the idea that we have to maximise the amount of utility, i.e. the maximise the amount of good in the world. In this short essay two types of utilitarianism are discussed.<sup>1</sup>

### Act-utilitarianism

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p168138766683695088bh2ae\_400 In act-  
utilitarianism, we are required to promote those acts which will result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The consequences of the act of giving money to charity would be considered right in act-utilitarianism, because the money increases the happiness of many people, rather than just yourself.

To see the utility of an action as only a criterion for rightness is to regard the maximisation of utility as what makes an action right. This leaves open the question of how one is to incorporate utilitarianism into one's life.

## Rule-utilitarianism

Rule-utilitarianism is a reaction to that objection. The principle of utility in rule-utilitarianism is to follow those rules which will result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In the example above, the general rule would be: 'share your wealth'. Utilitarianism holds that whatever produces the greatest utility (pleasure or any other such value as defined and justified by the utilitarian) is good and that which produces the greatest nett utility, is considered right. Both theories count as utilitarian because both define that which produces the greatest utility as good and seek for the greatest nett amount of utility, be it either through actions or indirectly through rules.

One objection to rule-utilitarianism is that in some situations the utility of breaking a certain rule could be greater than keeping it. It is, for example, not difficult to imagine that a rule-utilitarian who lives by the rule 'tell the truth', sometimes will find him or herself forced to lie in order to increase utility. John Smart argues that refusal to break a generally beneficial rule in cases where it would be beneficial to do so seems irrational for a utilitarian and is a form of rule-worship.

When a rule-utilitarian is compelled to break a rule, he or she will be forced to modify the rule in order to repair the theory. This rule-modifying will continue as long as there are situations where the rules do not produce the greatest utility. The rule for promise-keeping, for example, would be of the form: "Always keep your promises except ..."; with a very long list of exceptions. The rule-breaking is necessary in order to maintain the greatest utility. A plausible formulation of rule-utilitarianism would thus have it recommend the same actions as act-utilitarianism. The two kinds are extensionally equivalent and the only stable rule available to the rule-utilitarian is the act-utilitarian one, e.g. to maximise the benefit of your actions.

The rule-utilitarian might defend the theory by saying that it is

beneficial to follow the rule in most cases, so the general good is still increased when looking at a series of situations. Another reply might be that it is better that everybody follows the rule than that nobody should, as the latter situation would certainly not be beneficial to the greater good of all. Other reasons sometimes put forward include: rules overcome the need to constantly do a 'cost-benefit' utility analysis, which can be impractical; they may overcome our inability to calculate the consequences our actions will have on other people's welfare; and they may overcome our inability to act without prejudice, self interest and failure of imagination.

## 42. Kant the Moral Order

### Kant: The Moral Order

Having mastered epistemology and metaphysics, [Kant](#) believed that a rigorous application of the same methods of reasoning would yield an equal success in dealing with the problems of moral philosophy. Thus, in the [KRITIK DER PRACTISCHEN VERNUNFT \(CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON\)](#) (1788), he proposed a “Table of the Categories of Freedom in Relation to the Concepts of Good and Evil,” using the familiar logical distinctions as the basis for a catalog of synthetic *a priori* judgments that have bearing on the evaluation of human action, and declared that only two things inspire genuine awe: “*der bestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir*” (“the starry sky above and the moral law within”). Kant used ordinary moral notions as the foundation for a derivation of this moral law in his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* ([Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals](#)) (1785).

#### *From Good Will to Universal Law*

We begin with the concept of that which can be conceived to be good without qualification, a good will. Other good features of human nature and the benefits of a good life, [Kant](#) pointed out, have value only under appropriate conditions, since they may be used either for good or for evil. But a good will is [intrinsically](#) good; its value is wholly self-contained and utterly independent of its external relations. Since our practical reason is better suited to the development and guidance of a good will than to the achievement of [happiness](#), it follows that the value of a good will does not depend

even on the results it manages to produce as the consequences of human action.

Kant's moral theory is, therefore, [deontological](#): actions are morally right in virtue of their motives, which must derive more from [duty](#) than from inclination. The clearest examples of morally right action are precisely those in which an individual agent's determination to act in accordance with duty overcomes her evident self-interest and obvious desire to do otherwise. But in such a case, Kant argues, the moral value of the action can only reside in a formal principle or "maxim," the general commitment to act in this way because it is one's duty. So he concludes that "Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law."

According to Kant, then, the ultimate principle of morality must be a moral law conceived so abstractly that it is capable of guiding us to the right action in application to every possible set of circumstances. So the only relevant feature of the moral law is its generality, the fact that it has the formal property of [universalizability](#), by virtue of which it can be applied at all times to every moral agent. From this chain of reasoning about our ordinary moral concepts, Kant derived as a preliminary statement of moral obligation the notion that right actions are those that practical reason would will as universal law.

### *Imperatives for Action*

More accurate comprehension of morality, of course, requires the introduction of a more precise philosophical vocabulary. Although everything naturally acts in accordance with law, [Kant](#) supposed, only rational beings do so consciously, in obedience to the objective principles determined by practical reason. Of course, human agents also have subjective impulses—desires and inclinations that may contradict the dictates of reason. So we experience the claim of reason as an [obligation](#), a command that we act in a particular

way, or an **imperative**. Such imperatives may occur in either of two distinct forms, [hypothetical or categorical](#).

A hypothetical imperative conditionally demands performance of an action for the sake of some other end or purpose; it has the form “Do A in order to achieve X.” The application of hypothetical imperatives to ethical decisions is mildly troublesome: in such cases it is clear that we are morally obliged to perform the action A only if we are sure **both** that X is a legitimate goal **and** that doing A will in fact produce this desirable result. For a perfectly rational being, all of this would be analytic, but given the general limitations of human knowledge, the joint conditions may rarely be satisfied.

A categorical imperative, on the other hand, unconditionally demands performance of an action for its own sake; it has the form “Do A.” An absolute moral demand of this sort gives rise to familiar difficulties: since it expresses moral obligation with the perfect necessity that would directly bind any will uncluttered by subjective inclinations, the categorical imperative must be known *a priori*; yet it cannot be an analytic judgment, since its content is not contained in the concept of a rational agent as such. The supreme principle of morality must be a synthetic *a priori* proposition. Leaving its justification for the third section of the *Grounding* (and the *Second Critique*), Kant proceeded to a discussion of the content and application of the categorical imperative.

### *The Categorical Imperative*

Constrained only by the principle of universalizability, the practical reason of any rational being understands the categorical imperative to be: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” That is, each individual agent regards itself as determining, by its decision to act in a certain way, that everyone (including itself) will always act according to the same general rule in the future. This expression of the moral law, [Kant](#) maintained, provides a concrete, practical



method for evaluating particular human actions of several distinct varieties.

Consider, for example, the case (#2 in the text) of someone who contemplates relieving a financial crisis by borrowing money from someone else, promising to repay it in the future while in fact having no intention of doing so. (Notice that this is not the case of finding yourself incapable of keeping a promise originally made in good faith, which would require a different analysis.) The maxim of this action would be that it is permissible to borrow money under false pretenses if you really need it. But as Kant pointed out, making this maxim into a universal law would be clearly self-defeating. The entire practice of lending money on promise presupposes at least the honest intention to repay; if this condition were universally ignored, the (universally) false promises would never be effective as methods of borrowing. Since the universalized maxim is contradictory in and of itself, no one could will it to be law, and Kant concluded that we have a perfect duty (to which there can never be any exceptions whatsoever) not to act in this manner.

On the other hand, consider the less obvious case (#4 in the text) of someone who lives comfortably but contemplates refusing any assistance to people who are struggling under great hardships. The maxim here would be that it is permissible never to help those who are less well-off than ourselves. Although Kant conceded that no direct contradiction would result from the universalization of such a rule of conduct, he argued that no one could consistently **will** that it become the universal law, since even the most fortunate among us rightly allow for the possibility that we may at some future time find ourselves in need of the benevolence of others. Here we have only an imperfect duty not act so selfishly, since particular instances may require exceptions to the rule when it conflicts either with another imperfect duty (e.g., when I don't have enough money to help everyone in need) or a perfect duty (e.g., if the only way to get more money would be under a false promise).

Kant also supposed that moral obligations arise even when other people are not involved. Since it would be contradictory to

universalize the maxim of taking one's own life if it promises more misery than satisfaction (#1), he argued, we have a perfect duty to ourselves not to commit suicide. And since no one would will a universalized maxim of neglecting to develop the discipline required for fulfilling one's natural abilities (#3), we have an imperfect duty to ourselves not to waste our talents.

These are only examples of what a detailed application of the moral law would entail, but they illustrate the general drift of Kant's moral theory. In cases of each of the four sorts, he held that there is a contradiction—either in the maxim itself or in the will—involved in any attempt to make the rule under which we act into a universal law. The essence of immorality, then, is to make an exception of myself by acting on maxims that I cannot willfully universalize. It is always wrong to act in one way while wishing that everyone else would act otherwise. (The perfect world for a thief would be one in which everyone else always respected private property.) Thus, the purely formal expression of the categorical imperative is shown to yield significant practical application to moral decisions.

### *Alternative Formulae for the Categorical Imperative*

Although he held that there is only one categorical imperative of morality, [Kant](#) found it helpful to express it in several ways. Some of the alternative statements can be regarded as minor variations on his major themes, but two differ from the “formula of universal law” sufficiently to warrant a brief independent discussion.

Kant offered the “formula of the end in itself” as: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” This places more emphasis on the unique value of human life as deserving of our ultimate moral respect and thus proposes a more personal view of morality. In application to particular cases, of course, it yields the same results: violating a perfect duty by making a false promise (or killing myself) would be

to treat another person (or myself) merely as a means for getting money (or avoiding pain), and violating an imperfect duty by refusing to offer benevolence (or neglecting my talents) would be a failure to treat another person (or myself) as an end in itself. Thus, the Kantian imperative agrees with the Christian expression of “The Golden Rule” by demanding that we derive from our own self-interest a generalized concern for all human beings.

Drawing everything together, Kant arrived at the “formula of autonomy,” under which the decision to act according to a maxim is actually regarded as having made it a universal law. Here the concern with human dignity is combined with the principle of universalizability to produce a conception of the moral law as self-legislated by each for all. As Kant puts it,

A rational being belongs to the kingdom of ends as a member when he legislates in it universal laws while also being himself subject to these laws. He belongs to it as sovereign, when as legislator he is himself subject to the will of no other.

A rational being must always regard himself as legislator in a kingdom of ends rendered possible by freedom of the will, whether as member or as sovereign.

In this final formulation, the similarity of Kant’s moral theory with his epistemology should be clear. Just as the understanding in each of us determines the regulative principles of natural science that all must share, so the practical reason in each of us determines the universal maxims of morality that all must obey.

### *Autonomy of the Will*

In fact, this final formula for the categorical imperative brings us back to the original concept of the will itself as that which is good without qualification. At this point in the argument, [\*Kant\*](#) can

provide a more technical statement of its intrinsic moral value by distinguishing between [autonomy and heteronomy](#) of the will.

A **heteronomous will** is one in obedience to rules of action that have been legislated externally to it. Such a will is always submitting itself to some other end, and the principles of its action will invariably be hypothetical imperatives urging that it act in such a way as to receive pleasure, appease the moral sense, or seek personal perfection. In any case, the moral obligations it proposes cannot be regarded as completely binding upon any agent, since their maxim of action comes from outside it.

An **autonomous will**, on the other hand, is entirely self-legislating: The moral obligations by which it is perfectly bound are those which it has imposed upon itself while simultaneously regarding them as binding upon everyone else by virtue of their common possession of the same rational faculties. All genuinely moral action, Kant supposed, flows from the freely chosen dictates of an autonomous will. So even the possibility of morality presupposes that human agents have free will, and the final section of the *Grounding* is devoted to Kant's effort to prove that they do.

## *Human Freedom*

As we might expect, [Kant](#) offered as proof of human freedom a [transcendental argument](#) from the fact of moral agency to the truth of its presupposed condition of free will. This may seem to be perfectly analogous to the use of similar arguments for synthetic *a priori* judgments in the *First Critique*, but the procedure is more viciously circular here. Having demonstrated the supreme principle of morality by reference to autonomy, Kant can hardly now claim to ground free will upon the supposed fact of morality. That would be to exceed the bounds of reason by employing an epistemological argument for metaphysical purposes.

Here's another way of looking at it: Each case of moral action may be said to embody its own unique instance of the antinomy between

freedom and causal determination. For in order to do the right thing, it must at least be possible for my action to have some real effect in the world, yet I must perform it in complete independence from any external influence. Morality requires both freedom and causality in me, and of course Kant supposes that they are. I can think of myself from two standpoints: I operate within the phenomenal realm by participating fully in the causal regularities to which it is subject; but as a timeless thing in itself in the noumenal realm I must be wholly free. The trick is to think of myself in both ways at once, as sensibly determined but intelligibly free.

Kant rightly confesses at the end of the *Grounding* that serious contemplation of morality leads us to the very limits of human reason. Since action in accordance with the moral law requires an autonomous will, we must suppose ourselves to be free; since the correspondence of happiness with virtue cannot be left to mere coincidence, we must suppose that there is a god who guarantees it; and since the moral perfection demanded by the categorical imperative cannot be attained in this life, we must suppose ourselves to live forever. Thus god, freedom, and immortality, which we have seen to be metaphysical illusions that lie beyond the reach of pure reason, turn out to be the three great postulates of practical reason.

Although the truth about ourselves and god as noumenal beings can never be determined with perfect certainty, on Kant's view, we can continue to function as responsible moral agents only by acting as if it obtains. Things could hardly have been otherwise: the lofty dignity of the moral law, like the ultimate nature of reality, is the sort of thing we cannot know but are bound to believe.

## *Morality and Peace*

[Kant](#)'s interest in moral matters was not exclusively theoretical. In *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Metaphysics of Morals*) (1797) he worked out the practical application of the categorical imperative in some

detail, deriving a fairly comprehensive catalog of specific rules for the governance of social and personal morality. What each of us must actually will as universal, Kant supposed, is a very rigid system of narrowly prescribed conduct.

In *Zum ewigen Frieden (On Perpetual Peace)* (1795), Kant proposed a high-minded scheme for securing widespread political stability and security. If statesmen would listen to philosophers, he argued, we could easily achieve an international federation of independent republics, each of which reduces its standing army, declines to interfere in the internal affairs of other states, and agrees to be governed by the notion of universal hospitality.

### *Kant's Third Critique*

The final component of [Kant's](#) critical philosophy found expression in his ([KRITIK DER URTEILSKRAFT \(CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT\)](#) 1790). Where the first *Critique* had dealt with understanding in relation to reality and the second had been concerned with practical reason in relation to action, this third *Critique* was meant to show that there is a systematic connection between the two, a common feature underlying every use of synthetic *a priori* judgments, namely the concept of **purpose**. In the last analysis, Kant supposed, it is our compulsion to find meaning and purpose in the world that impels us to accept the tenets of transcendental idealism.

In [aesthetics](#), for example, all of our judgments about what is beautiful or sublime derive from the determination to impose an underlying form on the sensory manifold. Like mathematics, art is concerned with the discovery or creation of unity in our experience of the spatio-temporal world. Teleological judgments in science, theology, and morality similarly depend upon our fundamental convictions, that operation of the universe has some deep purpose and that we are capable of comprehending it.

Kant's final word here offers an explanation of our persistent desire to transcend from the phenomenal realm to the noumenal.

We must impose the forms of space and time on all we perceive, we must suppose that the world we experience functions according to natural laws, we must regulate our conduct by reference to a self-legislated categorical imperative, and we must postulate the noumenal reality of ourselves, god, and free will—all because a failure to do so would be an implicit confession that the world may be meaningless, and that would be utterly intolerable for us. Thus, Kant believed, the ultimate worth of his philosophy lay in his willingness “to criticize reason in order to make room for faith.” The [nineteenth-century](#) German philosophers who followed him quickly moved to transform his modest critical philosophy into the monumental metaphysical system of absolute idealism.

## 43. Kantian Ethics (Overview)

### Kantian Ethics



**Kantian ethics** refers to a [deontological ethical theory](#) ascribed to the German philosopher [Immanuel Kant](#). The theory, developed as a result of [Enlightenment rationalism](#), is based on the view that the only intrinsically good thing is a good [will](#); an action can only be good if its [maxim](#) – the principle behind it – is duty to [the moral law](#). Central to Kant's construction of the moral law is the [categorical imperative](#), which acts on all people, regardless of their interests or desires. Kant formulated the categorical imperative in various ways. His principle of [universalisability](#) requires that, for an action to be permissible, it must be possible to apply it to all people without a contradiction occurring. His formulation of humanity as an end in itself requires that humans are never treated merely as a [means to](#)



[an end](#), but always also as ends in themselves. The formulation of [autonomy](#) concludes that rational agents are bound to the moral law by their own will, while Kant's concept of the [Kingdom of Ends](#) requires that people act as if the principles of their actions establish a law for a hypothetical kingdom. Kant also distinguished between perfect and imperfect duties. A perfect duty, such as the duty not to lie, always holds true; an imperfect duty, such as the duty to give to charity, can be made flexible and applied in particular time and place.

American philosopher [Louis Pojman](#) has cited [Pietism](#), political philosopher [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), the modern debate between [rationalism](#) and [empiricism](#), and the influence of [natural law](#) as influences on the development of Kant's ethics. Other philosophers have argued that Kant's parents and his teacher, [Martin Knutzen](#), influenced his ethics. Those influenced by Kantian ethics include philosopher [Jürgen Habermas](#), political philosopher [John Rawls](#), and [psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan](#). German philosopher [G. W. F. Hegel](#) criticised Kant for not providing specific enough detail in his moral theory to affect decision-making and for denying human nature. German philosopher [Arthur Schopenhauer](#) argued that ethics should attempt to describe how people behave and criticised Kant for being prescriptive. Michael Stocker has argued that acting out of duty can diminish other moral motivations such as friendship, while Marcia Baron has defended the theory by arguing that duty does not diminish other motivations. The [Catholic Church](#) has criticised Kant's ethics as contradictory and regards [Christian ethics](#) as more compatible with [virtue ethics](#).

The claim that all humans are due dignity and respect as autonomous agents means that medical professionals should be happy for their treatments to be performed upon anyone, and that patients must never be treated merely as useful for society. Kant's approach to [sexual ethics](#) emerged from his view that humans should never be used merely as a means to an end, leading him to regard sexual activity as degrading and to condemn certain specific sexual practices. [Feminist philosophers](#) have used Kantian ethics to

condemn practices such as [prostitution](#) and [pornography](#) because they do not treat women as ends. Kant also believed that, because animals do not possess rationality, we cannot have duties to them except indirect duties not to develop immoral dispositions through cruelty towards them. Kant used the example of lying as an application of his ethics: because there is a perfect duty to tell the truth, we must never lie, even if it seems that lying would bring about better consequences than telling the truth.

## 44. Kantian Ethics (Main Concepts)

Although all of Kant's work develops his ethical theory, it is most clearly defined in [Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals](#), [Critique of Practical Reason](#) and [Metaphysics of Morals](#). As part of the [Enlightenment](#) tradition, Kant based his ethical theory on the belief that reason should be used to determine how people ought to act.<sup>[1]</sup> He did not attempt to prescribe specific action, but instructed that reason should be used to determine how to behave.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Good will and duty[\[edit\]](#)

In his combined works, Kant constructed the basis for an ethical law from the concept of duty.<sup>[3]</sup> Kant began his ethical theory by arguing that the only virtue that can be unqualifiedly good is a good will. No other virtue has this status because every other virtue can be used to achieve immoral ends (the virtue of loyalty is not good if one is loyal to an evil person, for example). The good will is unique in that it is always good and maintains its moral value even when it fails to achieve its moral intentions.<sup>[4]</sup> Kant regarded the good will as a single moral principle which freely chooses to use the other virtues for moral ends.<sup>[5]</sup>

For Kant a good will is a broader conception than a will which acts from duty. A will which acts from duty is distinguishable as a will which overcomes hindrances in order to keep the moral law. A dutiful will is thus a special case of a good will which becomes visible in adverse conditions. Kant argues that only acts performed with regard to duty have moral worth. This is not to say that acts performed merely in accordance with duty are worthless (these still

deserve approval and encouragement), but that special esteem is given to acts which are performed out of duty.<sup>[6]</sup>

Kant's conception of duty does not entail that people perform their duties grudgingly. Although duty often constrains people and prompts them to act against their inclinations, it still comes from an agent's volition: they desire to keep the moral law. Thus, when an agent performs an action from duty it is because the rational incentives matter to them more than their opposing inclinations. Kant wished to move beyond the conception morality as externally imposed duties and present an ethics of autonomy, when rational agents freely recognise the claims reason makes upon them.<sup>[7]</sup>

### *Perfect and imperfect duties*[\[edit\]](#)

Applying the categorical imperative, duties arise because failure to fulfil them would either result in a contradiction in conception or in a contradiction in the will. The former are classified as perfect duties, the latter as imperfect. A perfect duty always holds true—there is a perfect duty to tell the truth, so we must never lie. An imperfect duty allows flexibility—beneficence is an imperfect duty because we are not obliged to be completely beneficent at all times, but may choose the times and places in which we are.<sup>[8]</sup> Kant believed that perfect duties are more important than imperfect duties: if a conflict between duties arises, the perfect duty must be followed.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Categorical Imperative[\[edit\]](#)

Main Article: [Categorical Imperative](#)

The primary formulation of Kant's ethics is the categorical imperative,<sup>[10]</sup> from which he derived four further formulations.<sup>[11]</sup> Kant made a distinction between categorical and hypothetical

imperatives. A hypothetical imperative is one we must obey if we want to satisfy our desires: 'go to the doctor' is a hypothetical imperative because we are only obliged to obey it if we want to get well. A categorical imperative binds us regardless of our desires: everyone has a duty to not lie, regardless of circumstances and even if it is in our interest to do so. These imperatives are morally binding because they are based on reason, rather than contingent facts about an agent.<sup>[12]</sup> Unlike hypothetical imperatives, which bind us insofar as we are part of a group or society which we owe duties to, we cannot opt out of the categorical imperative because we cannot opt out of being rational agents. We owe a duty to rationality by virtue of being rational agents; therefore, rational moral principles apply to all rational agents at all times.<sup>[13]</sup>

### *Universalizability*<sup>[edit]</sup>

Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative is that of universalizability.<sup>[14]</sup>

Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

– IMMANUEL KANT, GROUNDWORK OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS (1785)<sup>[15]</sup>

When someone acts, it is according to a rule, or [maxim](#). For Kant, an act is only permissible if one is willing for the maxim that allows the action to be a universal law by which everyone acts.<sup>[15]</sup> Maxims fail this test if they produce either a contradiction in conception or a contradiction in the will when universalized. A contradiction in conception happens when, if a maxim were to be universalized, it ceases to make sense because the "...maxim would necessarily destroy itself as soon as it was made a universal law."<sup>[16]</sup> For example, if the maxim 'It is permissible to break promises' was universalized, no one would trust any promises made, so the idea of a promise

would become meaningless; the maxim would be self-contradictory because, when universalized, promises cease to be meaningful. The maxim is not moral because it is logically impossible to universalize—we could not conceive of a world where this maxim was universalized.<sup>[17]</sup> A maxim can also be immoral if it creates a contradiction in the will when universalized. This does not mean a logical contradiction, but that universalizing the maxim leads to a state of affairs that no rational being would desire. For example, Driver argues that the maxim ‘I will not give to charity’ produces a contradiction in the will when universalized because a world where no one gives to charity would be undesirable for the person who acts by that maxim.<sup>[18]</sup>

Kant believed that morality is the [objective](#) law of reason: just as objective physical laws necessitate physical actions (apples fall down because of gravity, for example), objective rational laws necessitate rational actions. He thus believed that a perfectly rational being must also be perfectly moral because a perfectly rational being [subjectively](#) finds it necessary to do what is rationally necessary. Because humans are not perfectly rational (they partly act by instinct), Kant believed that humans must conform their subjective will with objective rational laws, which he called conformity obligation.<sup>[19]</sup> Kant argued that the objective law of reason is [a priori](#), existing externally from rational being. Just as physical laws exist prior to physical beings, rational laws (morality) exist prior to rational beings. Therefore, according to Kant, rational morality is universal and cannot change depending on circumstance.<sup>[20]</sup>

### *Humanity as an end in itself*[\[edit\]](#)

Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative is to treat humanity as an end in itself:

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your

own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.

– IMMANUEL KANT, GROUNDWORK OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS (1785)<sup>[21]</sup>

Kant argued that rational beings can never be treated merely as means to ends; they must always also be treated as ends themselves, requiring that their own reasoned motives must be equally respected. This derives from Kant's claim that reason motivates morality: it demands that we respect reason as a motive in all beings, including other people. A rational being cannot rationally consent to being used merely as a means to an end, so they must always be treated as an end.<sup>[22]</sup> Kant justified this by arguing that moral obligation is a rational necessity: that which is rationally willed is morally right. Because all rational agents rationally will themselves to be an end and never merely a means, it is morally obligatory that they are treated as such.<sup>[23][24][25]</sup> This does not mean that we can never treat a human as a means to an end, but that when we do, we also treat him as an end in himself.<sup>[22]</sup>

### *Formula of autonomy*<sup>[edit]</sup>

Kant's Formula of Autonomy expresses the idea that an agent is obliged to follow the Categorical Imperative because of their rational will, rather than any outside influence. Kant believed that any moral law motivated by the desire to fulfill some other interest would deny the Categorical Imperative, leading him to argue that the moral law must only arise from a rational will.<sup>[26]</sup> This principle requires people to recognize the right of others to act autonomously and means that, as moral laws must be universalisable, what is required of one person is required of all.<sup>[27][28][29]</sup>

## *Kingdom of Ends*[\[edit\]](#)

Main article: [Kingdom of Ends](#)

Another formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative is the Kingdom of Ends:

A rational being must always regard himself as giving laws either as member or as sovereign in a kingdom of ends which is rendered possible by the freedom of will.

– IMMANUEL KANT, GROUNDWORK OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS (1785)[\[30\]](#)

This formulation requires that actions be considered as if their maxim is to provide a law for a hypothetical Kingdom of Ends. Accordingly, people have an obligation to act upon principles that a community of rational agents would accept as laws.[\[31\]](#) In such a community, each individual would only accept maxims that can govern every member of the community without treating any member merely as a means to an end.[\[32\]](#) Although the Kingdom of Ends is an ideal—the actions of other people and events of nature ensure that actions with good intentions sometimes result in harm—we are still required to act categorically, as legislators of this ideal kingdom.[\[33\]](#)



# 45. Kantian Ethics (Applications)

## APPLICATIONS OF KANTIAN ETHICS

### Medical ethics

Kant believed that the shared ability of humans to reason should be the basis of morality, and that it is the ability to reason that makes humans morally significant. He therefore believed that all humans should have the right to common dignity and respect.<sup>[68]</sup> Margaret Eaton argues that, according to Kant's ethics, a medical professional must be happy for their own practices to be used by and on anyone, even if they were the patient themselves. For example, a researcher who wished to perform tests on patients without their knowledge must be happy for all researchers to do so.<sup>[69]</sup> She also argues that Kant's requirement of autonomy would mean that a patient must be able to make a fully informed decision about treatment, making it immoral to perform tests on unknowing patients. Medical research should be motivated out of respect for the patient, so they must be informed of all facts, even if this would be likely to dissuade the patient.<sup>[70]</sup> Jeremy Sugarman has argued that Kant's formulation of autonomy requires that patients are never used merely for the benefit of society, but are always treated as rational people with their own goals.<sup>[71]</sup> [Aaron Hinkley](#) notes that a Kantian account of autonomy requires respect for choices that are arrived at rationally, not for choices which are arrived at by idiosyncratic or non-rational means. He argues that there may be some difference between what a purely rational agent would choose and what a patient actually chooses, the difference being the result of non-rational

idiosyncrasies. Although a Kantian physician ought not to lie to or coerce a patient, Hinkley suggests that some form of paternalism – such as through withholding information which may prompt a non-rational response – could be acceptable.<sup>[72]</sup>

In her work *How Kantian Ethics Should Treat Pregnancy and Abortion*, Susan Feldman argues that [abortion](#) should be defended according to Kantian ethics. She proposed that a woman should be treated as a dignified autonomous person, with control over their body, as Kant suggested. She believes that the free choice of women would be paramount in Kantian ethics, requiring abortion to be the mother's decision.<sup>[73]</sup> Dean Harris has noted that, if Kantian ethics is to be used in the discussion of abortion, it must be decided whether a fetus is an autonomous person.<sup>[74]</sup> Kantian ethicist Carl Cohen argues that the potential to be rational or participation in a generally rational species is the relevant distinction between humans and inanimate objects or irrational animals. Cohen believes that even when humans are not rational because of age (such as babies or fetuses) or mental disability, agents are still morally obligated to treat them as an ends in themselves, equivalent to a rational adult such as a mother seeking an abortion.<sup>[75]</sup>

## Sexual ethics

Kant viewed humans as being subject to the animalistic desires of self-preservation, species-preservation, and the preservation of enjoyment. He argued that humans have a duty to avoid maxims that harm or degrade themselves, including suicide, sexual degradation, and drunkenness.<sup>[76]</sup> This led Kant to regard [sexual intercourse](#) as degrading because it reduces humans to an object of pleasure. He admitted sex only within marriage, which he regarded as “a merely animal union”. He believed that masturbation is worse than suicide, reducing a person's status to below that of an animal; he argued that rape should be punished with castration and that [bestiality](#)

requires expulsion from society.<sup>[77]</sup> Feminist philosopher [Catharine MacKinnon](#) has argued that many contemporary practices would be deemed immoral by Kant's standards because they dehumanise women. Sexual harassment, prostitution and pornography, she argues, objectify women and do not meet Kant's standard of human autonomy. Commercial sex has been criticised for turning both parties into objects (and thus using them as a means to an end); mutual consent is problematic because in consenting, people choose to objectify themselves. [Alan Soble](#) has noted that more liberal Kantian ethicists believe that, depending on other contextual factors, the consent of women can vindicate their participation in pornography and prostitution.<sup>[78]</sup>

## Animal ethics

Because Kant viewed rationality as the basis for being a [moral patient](#)—one due moral consideration—he believed that animals have no moral rights. Animals, according to Kant, are not rational, thus one cannot behave immorally towards them.<sup>[79]</sup> Although he did not believe we have any duties towards animals, Kant did believe being cruel to them was wrong because our behaviour might influence our attitudes towards human beings: if we become accustomed to harming animals, then we are more likely to see harming humans as acceptable.<sup>[80]</sup>

Ethicist [Tom Regan](#) rejects Kant's assessment of the moral worth of animals on three main points: First, he rejects Kant's claim that animals are not self-conscious. He then challenges Kant's claim that animals have no intrinsic moral worth because they cannot make moral judgement. Regan argues that, if a being's moral worth is determined by its ability to make a moral judgement, then we must regard humans who are incapable of moral thought as being equally undue moral consideration. Regan finally argues that Kant's assertion that animals exist merely as a means to an ends is

unsupported; the fact that animals have a life that can go well or badly suggests that, like humans, they have their own ends.<sup>[81]</sup>

## Lying

Kant believed that the Categorical Imperative provides us with the maxim that we ought not to lie in any circumstances, even if we are trying to bring about good consequences, such as lying to a murderer to prevent them from finding their intended victim. Kant argued that, because we cannot fully know what the consequences of any action will be, the result might be unexpectedly harmful. Therefore, we ought to act to avoid the known wrong—lying—rather than to avoid a potential wrong. If there are harmful consequences, we are blameless because we acted according to our duty.<sup>[82]</sup> Driver argues that this might not be a problem if we choose to formulate our maxims differently: the maxim ‘I will lie to save an innocent life’ can be universalised. However, this new maxim may still treat the murderer as a means to an end, which we have a duty to avoid doing. Thus we may still be required to tell the truth to the murderer in Kant’s example.<sup>[83]</sup>

## 46. Kantian Ethics (Criticisms)

*G. W. F Hegel*

German philosopher [G. W. F. Hegel](#) presented two main criticisms of Kantian ethics. He first argued that Kantian ethics provides no specific information about what people should do because Kant's moral law is solely a [principle of non-contradiction](#).<sup>[2]</sup> He argued that Kant's ethics lack any content and so cannot constitute a supreme principle of morality. To illustrate this point, Hegel and his followers have presented a number of cases in which the Formula of Universal Law either provides no meaningful answer or gives an obviously wrong answer. Hegel used Kant's example of being trusted with another man's money to argue that Kant's Formula of Universal Law cannot determine whether a social system of property is a morally good thing, because either answer can entail contradictions. He also used the example of helping the poor: if everyone helped the poor, there would be no poor left to help, so beneficence would be impossible if universalised, making it immoral according to Kant's model.<sup>[52]</sup> Hegel's second criticism was that Kant's ethics forces humans into an internal conflict between reason and desire. For Hegel, it is unnatural for humans to suppress their desire and subordinate it to reason. This means that, by not addressing the tension between self-interest and morality, Kant's ethics cannot give humans any reason to be moral.<sup>[53]</sup>

*Arthur Schopenhauer*

German philosopher [Arthur Schopenhauer](#) criticised Kant's belief

that ethics should concern what ought to be done, insisting that the scope of ethics should be to attempt to explain and interpret what actually happens. Whereas Kant presented an idealised version of what ought to be done in a perfect world, Schopenhauer argued that ethics should instead be practical and arrive at conclusions that could work in the real world, capable of being presented as a solution to the world's problems.<sup>[54]</sup> Schopenhauer drew a parallel with [aesthetics](#), arguing that in both cases prescriptive rules are not the most important part of the discipline. Because he believed that virtue cannot be taught—a person is either virtuous or is not—he cast the proper place of morality as restraining and guiding people's behaviour, rather than presenting unattainable universal laws.<sup>[55]</sup>

### *Friedrich Nietzsche*

Philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) criticised all contemporary moral systems, with a special focus on [Christian](#) and Kantian ethics. He argued that all modern ethical systems share two problematic characteristics: first, they make a metaphysical claim about the nature of humanity, which must be accepted for the system to have any [normative](#) force; and second, the system benefits the interests of certain people, often over those of others. Although Nietzsche's primary objection is not that metaphysical claims about humanity are untenable (he also objected to ethical theories that do not make such claims), his two main targets—Kantianism and Christianity—do make metaphysical claims, which therefore feature prominently in Nietzsche's criticism.<sup>[56]</sup>

Nietzsche rejected fundamental components of Kant's ethics, particularly his argument that morality, God and immorality can be shown through reason. Nietzsche cast suspicion on the use of moral intuition, which Kant used as the foundation of his morality, arguing that it has no normative force in ethics. He further attempted to undermine key concepts in Kant's moral psychology, such as the will and pure reason. Like Kant, Nietzsche developed a concept of

autonomy; however, he rejected Kant's idea that valuing our own autonomy requires us to respect the autonomy of others.<sup>[57]</sup> A naturalist reading of Nietzsche's moral psychology stands contrary to Kant's conception of reason and desire. Under the Kantian model, reason is a fundamentally different motive to desire because it has the capacity to stand back from a situation and make an independent decision. Nietzsche conceives of the self as a social structure of all our different drives and motivations; thus, when it seems that our intellect has made a decision against our drives, it is actually just an alternative drive taking dominance over another. This is in direct contrast with Kant's view of the intellect as opposed to instinct; instead, it is just another instinct. There is thus no self capable of standing back and making a decision; the decision the self makes is simply determined by the strongest drive.<sup>[58]</sup> Kantian commentators have argued that Nietzsche's practical philosophy requires the existence of a self capable of standing back in the Kantian sense. For an individual to create values of their own, which is a key idea in Nietzsche's philosophy, they must be able to conceive of themselves as a unified agent. Even if the agent is influenced by their drives, he must regard them as his own, which undermines Nietzsche's conception of autonomy.<sup>[59]</sup>

### *John Stuart Mill*

Utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill criticised Kant for not realising that moral laws are justified by a moral intuition based on utilitarian principles (that the greatest good for the greatest number ought to be sought). Mill argued that Kant's ethics could not explain why certain actions are wrong without appealing to utilitarianism.<sup>[60]</sup> As basis for morality, Mill believed that his principle of utility has a stronger intuitive grounding than Kant's reliance on reason, and can better explain why certain actions are right or wrong.<sup>[61]</sup>

## *Virtue ethics*

[Virtue ethics](#) is a form of ethical theory which emphasises the character of an agent, rather than specific acts; many of its proponents have criticised Kant's deontological approach to ethics. [Elizabeth Anscombe](#) criticised modern ethical theories, including Kantian ethics, for their obsession with law and obligation. As well as arguing that theories which rely on a universal moral law are too rigid, Anscombe suggested that, because a moral law implies a moral lawgiver, they are irrelevant in modern secular society.<sup>[62]</sup> In his work [After Virtue](#), [Alasdair MacIntyre](#) criticises Kant's formulation of universalisability, arguing that various trivial and immoral maxims can pass the test, such as "Keep all your promises throughout your entire life except one". He further challenges Kant's formulation of humanity as an ends in itself by arguing that Kant provided no reason to treat others as means: the maxim "Let everyone except me be treated as a means", though seemingly immoral, can be universalised.<sup>[63]</sup> [Bernard Williams](#) argues that, by abstracting persons from character, Kant misrepresents persons and morality and [Philippa Foot](#) identified Kant as one of a select group of philosophers responsible for the neglect of virtue by [analytic philosophy](#).<sup>[64]</sup>

## *Catholic Church*

The [Catholic Church](#) has criticised Kantian ethics for its apparent contradiction, arguing that humans being co-legislators of morality contradicts the claim that morality is a priori. If something is universally a priori (i.e., existing unchangingly prior to experience), then it cannot also be in part dependent upon humans, who have not always existed

The theory of the categorical imperative is, moreover, inconsistent. According to it the human will is the highest



lawgiving authority, and yet subject to precepts enjoined on it.

– KEVIN KNIGHT, [CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA](#)<sup>[65]</sup>

Roman Catholic priest [Servais Pinckaers](#) criticised the modern desire for ethics to be autonomous and free from the authorities such as the Church, a development he partially attributed to thinkers such as Kant. Pinckaers saw this as potentially threatening to the legitimacy of the [Magisterium](#), but maintained that the link between the gospel and the moral law, and the shortcomings of human reason, leave a place for the moral authority of the Church.<sup>[66]</sup> Pinckaers regarded Christian ethics as closer to the virtue ethics of [Aristotle](#) than Kant's ethics. He presented virtue ethics as *freedom for excellence*, which regards freedom as acting in accordance with nature to develop one's virtues. Initially, this requires following rules—but the intention is that the agent develop virtuously, and regard acting morally as a joy. This is in contrast with *freedom of indifference*, which Pinckaers attributes to [William Ockham](#) and likens to Kant. On this view, freedom is set against nature: free actions are those not determined by passions or emotions. There is no development or progress in an agent's virtue, merely the forming of habit. This is closer to Kant's view of ethics, because Kant's conception of autonomy requires that an agent is not merely guided by their emotions, and is set in contrast with Pinckaer's conception of Christian ethics.<sup>[67]</sup>

# 47. Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## Aristotle: Ethics and the Virtues

### *The Goal of Ethics*

[Aristotle](#) applied the same patient, careful, descriptive approach to his examination of [moral philosophy](#) in the [Εθικη Νικομαχοι](#) ([NICOMACHEAN ETHICS](#)). Here he discussed the conditions under which moral responsibility may be ascribed to individual agents, the nature of the virtues and vices involved in moral evaluation, and the methods of achieving happiness in human life. The central issue for Aristotle is the question of character or personality – what does it take for an individual human being to be a good person?

Every activity has a final cause, the good at which it aims, and Aristotle argued that since there cannot be an infinite regress of merely [extrinsic](#) goods, there must be a highest good at which all human activity ultimately aims. ([Nic. Ethics I 2](#)) This end of human life could be called [happiness](#) (or living well), of course, but what is it really? Neither the ordinary notions of pleasure, wealth, and honor nor the philosophical theory of forms provide an adequate account of this ultimate goal, since even individuals who acquire the material goods or achieve intellectual knowledge may not be happy.

According to Aristotle, things of any variety have a characteristic function that they are properly used to perform. The good for human beings, then, must essentially involve the entire proper function of human life as a whole, and this must be an activity of the soul that expresses genuine virtue or excellence. ([Nic. Ethics I 7](#)) Thus, human beings should aim at a life in full conformity with their rational natures; for this, the satisfaction of desires and the acquisition of material goods are less important than the

achievement of [virtue](#). A happy person will exhibit a personality appropriately balanced between reasons and desires, with [moderation](#) characterizing all. In this sense, at least, “virtue is its own reward.” True happiness can therefore be attained only through the cultivation of the virtues that make a human life complete.

## *The Nature of Virtue*

Ethics is not merely a theoretical study for [Aristotle](#). Unlike any intellectual capacity, virtues of character are [dispositions](#) to act in certain ways in response to similar situations, the habits of behaving in a certain way. Thus, good conduct arises from habits that in turn can only be acquired by repeated action and correction, making ethics an intensely practical discipline.

Each of the virtues is a state of being that naturally seeks its [mean](#) {Gk. [μεσος](#) [*mesos*]} relative to us. According to Aristotle, the virtuous habit of action is always an intermediate state between the opposed vices of excess and deficiency: too much and too little are always wrong; the right kind of action always lies in the mean. ([Nic. Ethics II 6](#)) Thus, for example:

with respect to acting in the face of danger,  
[courage](#) {Gk. [ανδρεία](#) [*andreia*]} is a mean between  
the excess of *rashness* and the deficiency of *cowardice*;

with respect to the enjoyment of pleasures,  
[temperance](#) {Gk. [σωφροσύνη](#) [*sophrosúnê*]} is a mean between  
the excess of *intemperance* and the deficiency of *insensibility*;

with respect to spending money,  
*generosity* is a mean between  
the excess of *wastefulness* and the deficiency of *stinginess*;

with respect to relations with strangers,  
*being friendly* is a mean between  
the excess of *being ingratiating* and the deficiency of *being surly*;  
and

with respect to self-esteem,

[magnanimity](#) {Gk. [μεγαλοψυχία](#) [megalo $\psi$ ychia]} is a mean between

the excess of *vanity* and the deficiency of *pusillanimity*.

Notice that the application of this theory of virtue requires a great deal of flexibility: friendliness is closer to its excess than to its deficiency, while few human beings are naturally inclined to undervalue pleasure, so it is not unusual to overlook or ignore one of the extremes in each of these instances and simply to regard the virtue as the opposite of the other vice. Although the analysis may be complicated or awkward in some instances, the general plan of Aristotle's ethical doctrine is clear: avoid extremes of all sorts and seek moderation in all things. Not bad advice, surely. Some version of this general approach dominated Western culture for many centuries.

## *Voluntary Action*

Because ethics is a practical rather than a theoretical science, [Aristotle](#) also gave careful consideration to the aspects of human nature involved in acting and accepting [moral responsibility](#). Moral evaluation of an action [presupposes](#) the attribution of responsibility to a human agent. But in certain circumstances, this attribution would not be appropriate. Responsible action must be undertaken [voluntarily](#), on Aristotle's view, and human actions are involuntary under two distinct conditions: ([Nic. Ethics III 1](#))

First, actions that are produced by some external force (or, perhaps, under an extreme duress from outside the agent) are taken involuntarily, and the agent is not responsible for them. Thus, if someone grabs my arm and uses it to strike a third person, I cannot reasonably be blamed (or praised) morally for what my arm has done.

Second, actions performed out of ignorance are also involuntary. Thus, if I swing my arm for exercise and strike the third party who (unbeknownst to me) is standing nearby, then again I cannot be held

responsible for having struck that person. Notice that the sort of ignorance Aristotle is willing to regard as exculpatory is always of lack of awareness of relevant particulars. Striking other people while claiming to be ignorant of the moral rule under which it is wrong to do so would not provide any excuse on his view.

As we'll soon see, decisions to act voluntarily rely upon deliberation about the choice among alternative actions that the individual could perform. During the deliberative process, individual actions are evaluated in light of the good, and the best among them is then chosen for implementation. Under these conditions, Aristotle supposed, moral actions are within our power to perform or avoid; hence, we can reasonably be held responsible for them and their consequences. Just as with health of the body, virtue of the soul is a habit that can be acquired (at least in part) as the result of our own choices.

### *Deliberate Choice*

Although the virtues are habits of acting or dispositions to act in certain ways, [Aristotle](#) maintained that these habits are acquired by engaging in proper conduct on specific occasions and that doing so requires thinking about what one does in a specific way. Neither demonstrative knowledge of the sort employed in science nor aesthetic judgment of the sort applied in crafts are relevant to morality. The [understanding](#) {Gk. [διανοία](#) [*diánoia*]} can only explore the nature of origins of things, on Aristotle's view, and [wisdom](#) {Gk. [σοφία](#) [*sophía*]} can only trace the demonstratable connections among them.

But there is a distinctive mode of thinking that does provide adequately for morality, according to Aristotle: practical intelligence or [prudence](#) {Gk. [φρόνησις](#) [*phrónêsis*]}. This faculty alone comprehends the true character of individual and community welfare and applies its results to the guidance of human action.

Acting rightly, then, involves coordinating our desires with correct thoughts about the correct goals or ends.

This is the function of deliberative reasoning: to consider each of the many actions that are within one's power to perform, considering the extent to which each of them would contribute to the achievement of the appropriate goal or end, making a deliberate choice to act in the way that best fits that end, and then voluntarily engaging in the action itself. ([Nic. Ethics III 3](#)) Although virtue is different from intelligence, then, the acquisition of virtue relies heavily upon the exercise of that intelligence.

### *Weakness of the Will*

But doing the right thing is not always so simple, even though few people deliberately choose to develop vicious habits. [Aristotle](#) sharply disagreed with Socrates's belief that [knowing what is right always results in doing it](#). The great enemy of moral conduct, on Aristotle's view, is precisely the failure to behave well even on those occasions when one's deliberation has resulted in clear knowledge of what is right.

[Incontinent](#) agents suffer from a sort of [weakness of the will](#) {Gk. [ακρασία](#) [*akrásia*]} that prevents them from carrying out actions in conformity with what they have reasoned. ([Nic. Ethics VII 1](#)) This may appear to be a simple failure of intelligence, Aristotle acknowledged, since the akratic individual seems not to draw the appropriate connection between the general moral rule and the particular case to which it applies. Somehow, the overwhelming prospect of some great pleasure seems to obscure one's perception of what is truly good. But this difficulty, Aristotle held, need not be fatal to the achievement of virtue.

Although incontinence is not heroically moral, neither is it truly vicious. Consider the difference between an incontinent person, who knows what is right and aims for it but is sometimes overcome by pleasure, and an intemperate person, who purposefully seeks

excessive pleasure. Aristotle argued that the vice of intemperance is incurable because it destroys the principle of the related virtue, while incontinence is curable because respect for virtue remains. ([Nic. Ethics VII 8](#)) A clumsy archer may get better with practice, while a skilled archer who chooses not to aim for the target will not.

## *Friendship*

In a particularly influential section of the *Ethics*, [Aristotle](#) considered the role of human relationships in general and friendship {Gk. [φιλία](#) [*philia*]} in particular as a vital element in the good life.

*For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.*

Differentiating between the aims or goals of each, he distinguished three kinds of friendships that we commonly form. ([Nic. Ethics VIII 3](#)) A friendship for pleasure comes into being when two people discover that they have common interest in an activity which they can pursue together. Their reciprocal participation in that activity results in greater pleasure for each than either could achieve by acting alone. Thus, for example, two people who enjoy playing tennis might derive pleasure from playing each other. Such a relationship lasts only so long as the pleasure continues.

A friendship grounded on utility, on the other hand, comes into being when two people can benefit in some way by engaging in coordinated activity. In this case, the focus is on what use the two can derive from each other, rather than on any enjoyment they might have. Thus, for example, one person might teach another to play tennis for a fee: the one benefits by learning and the other benefits financially; their relationship is based solely on the mutual utility. A relationship of this sort lasts only so long as its utility.

A friendship for the good, however, comes into being when two

people engage in common activities solely for the sake of developing the overall goodness of the other. Here, neither pleasure nor utility are relevant, but the good is. ([Nic. Ethics VIII 4](#)) Thus, for example, two people with heart disease might play tennis with each other for the sake of the exercise that contributes to the overall health of both. Since the good is never wholly realized, a friendship of this sort should, in principle, last forever.

Rather conservatively representing his own culture, Aristotle expressed some rather peculiar notions about the likelihood of forming friendships of these distinct varieties among people of different ages and genders. But the general description has some value nevertheless, especially in its focus on reciprocity. Mixed friendships—those in which one party is seeking one payoff while the other seeks a different one—are inherently unstable and prone to dissatisfaction.

## *Achieving Happiness*

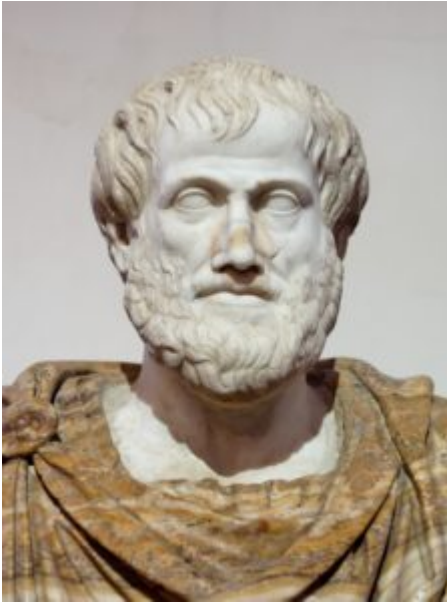
[Aristotle](#) rounded off his discussion of ethical living with a more detailed description of the achievement of true happiness. Pleasure is not a good in itself, he argued, since it is by its nature incomplete. But worthwhile activities are often associated with their own distinctive pleasures. Hence, we are rightly guided in life by our natural preference for engaging in pleasant activities rather than in unpleasant ones.

Genuine happiness lies in action that leads to virtue, since this alone provides true value and not just amusement. Thus, Aristotle held that contemplation is the highest form of moral activity because it is continuous, pleasant, self-sufficient, and complete. ([Nic. Ethics X 8](#)) In intellectual activity, human beings most nearly approach divine blessedness, while realizing all of the genuine human virtues as well.



# 48. Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

## Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean



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Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is sometimes dismissed as an unhelpful and unfortunate mistake in what would otherwise be – or perhaps, in spite of this lapse, still is – a worthwhile enterprise. Bernard Williams, for example, clearly regards it thus:

Aristotle's...views on [virtue] are bound up with one of the most celebrated and least useful parts of his system, the doctrine of the Mean, according to which every virtue of character lies between two correlative faults or vices..., which consist respectively of the

excess and the deficiency of something of which the virtue represents the right amount. The theory oscillates between an unhelpful analytical model (which Aristotle himself does not consistently follow) and a substantively depressing doctrine in favor of moderation. The doctrine of the Mean is better forgotten.[1]

Williams's remark strikes me as both unfair to Aristotle and, perhaps as a result, blind to certain ethical insights of which Aristotle is keenly aware. In this essay I shall offer a more charitable interpretation of the doctrine of the mean. In sections I-III I bring together various things Aristotle says in developing his view that virtue or excellence lies in the observance of a mean. In section IV I turn to the obvious fact that as I have interpreted it the doctrine of the mean does not provide detailed and unambiguous guidance to agents deliberating in particular situations. I suggest that it was not intended to provide such guidance, and argue that this does not mean that it is not a useful part of Aristotle's ethical theory worth the attention of moral philosophers.

## I

Aristotle develops the doctrine of the mean in the course of his discussion of *aretê*, excellence or virtue, in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see also *Eudemian Ethics*, Book II, chapters 3 and 5).[2] There he writes that

all excellence makes what has it good, and also enables it to perform its function well. For instance, the excellence of an eye makes the eye good and enables it to function well as an eye; having good eyes means being able to see well. Likewise, the excellence of a horse makes it a good horse, and so good at galloping, carrying its rider, and facing the enemy. If this is true in all cases, then, the excellence of a human being will be that disposition which makes him a good human being and which enables him to perform his function well. (1106a16-25)

The function or characteristic activity of human beings, Aristotle has argued in Book I, is "a way of living... consisting in the exercise of the psyche's capacities in accordance with reason, or at any rate not in opposition to reason"; a good person "exercises these

capacities and performs these activities well.” Excellence, then, is that condition which best suits us to perform those activities which are distinctively human. Hence the best life for a human being will involve “the active exercise of his psyche’s capacities in accordance with excellence” (1098a12-18).

But where does the mean come in? Aristotle summarizes his account of excellence in Book II, chapter 6:

excellence... is a settled disposition determining choice, involving the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, as the practically wise person would determine it. (1106b36-1107a2; cf. EE II.5, 1222a6-10)

But why should excellence or virtue involve the observance of a mean?

The notion of the mean, and that of the observance of the mean, would have been familiar to those who attended Aristotle’s lectures. They were at the conceptual center of the most advanced and sophisticated science of the day, medicine. Aristotle’s father was a physician, and medical concepts and examples played an important and widely-recognized role in the philosophizing of Aristotle’s day. Health was believed to lie in a balance of powers, in a mixture so constituted that none of its constituent elements eclipsed the others. The author of the Hippocratic treatise *On Breaths* writes that “opposites are cures for opposites. Medicine is in fact addition and subtraction, subtraction of what is in excess, addition of what is wanting.”<sup>[3]</sup> Aristotle himself expresses this view, e.g. in the *Topics* (139b21, 145b7-10). Proper balance or proportion makes for health, lack of it for disease (*On the Generation of Animals* 767a20-35; cf. *Physics* 246b3-20).

Aristotle imports this way of thinking into his account of ethical excellence or excellence of character. Bodily strength and health are destroyed by excess and deficiency. Too much food, or too much exercise, are bad for health, just as too little food or exercise are. The same holds in ethical matters. Here too excellence is

so constituted as to be destroyed by excess and deficiency ...

(here we must explain what is invisible by means of visible illustrations). (1104a12-13)

Bodily health is a matter of observing a mean between extremes of excess and deficiency. Further, Aristotle says, this provides an apt visible illustration of an invisible truth about ethical health. Excellence of any kind, Aristotle says,

aims at the mean [*tou mesou... stochastikê*: I discuss the importance of this construction below]. Excellence of character is concerned with emotions and acts, in which there can be excess or deficiency or a mean. For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain generally, either more or less than is right, and in both cases wrongly; while to have these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, toward the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount – and the best amount is of course the mark of excellence. Likewise, in acts there can be excess, deficiency and a mean.... Hence excellence is a mean state in the sense that it aims at the mean. (1106b15-29; cf. EE II.3, 1220b22-34)

In this important passage, to which I shall return shortly, we are invited to compare excellence of character – or the person who has such excellence – to a skilled archer able to hit a target. Aristotle begins the NE with this simile (1094a23-24), and he returns to it throughout. I shall argue that it can shed a good deal of light on the idea that virtue or excellence lies in a mean.

Missing the mark<sup>[4]</sup> is possible in a virtually indefinite number of ways. A person aiming at a target can miss to the right, to the left, above, below; a crooked shot can glance off the target, etc. To hit the mark one must land a shot within a relatively small, more or less precisely defined, area. Just so, Aristotle suggests, what is excellent and commendable to do is definite and limited. There is a correspondingly vast, relatively unlimited, area for wrongs and shots that miss the mark:

Missing the mark is possible in many ways (for badness is a form of the indefinite, to use Pythagorean terms, and goodness a form of

the definite), while success can be had only one way (which is why it is easy to err and hard to succeed – easy to miss the mark and hard to hit it). (1106b29-33)

Now while hitting the mark is in this sense a much more precise matter than missing it, there is still room for variation within the shots that hit the mark. More than one shot can hit the bulls-eye of a good-sized target, and all such hits are scored the same. And a shot need not hit the exact center of the bulls-eye to be an excellent one. In the same way, Aristotle's simile suggests, virtue rarely demands a single precisely determined act, or an emotional reaction of a particular intensity, duration, frequency, etc. It rather demands that one's acts or emotions fall somewhere within a more or less precisely delineated range.

For example, the person who flees from every danger is cowardly; the person who does not flee from anything is rash. What is courageous, then, falls somewhere between these extremes; courage is "preserved by the observance of the mean" (1104a26). The same is true of temperance; what is temperate lies in a mean between the extremes of excessive enjoyment of sensual pleasures and deficient enjoyment of such pleasures. Similar things, Aristotle thinks, can be said for each virtue. There are important differences among the dispositions Aristotle calls virtues, of course; but each virtue involves the observance of a mean between extremes. One extreme consists in some sort of excess; another in some sort of deficiency, though (as I shall argue) this way of talking can mislead. Our task in trying to be good is to find these means and avoid these opposed extremes.

The means in question are "relative to us." What are we to make of this? Aristotle explains:

By the mean of a thing I mean what is equally distant from either extreme, which is one and the same for everyone; by the mean relative to us what is neither too much nor too little, and this is not the same for everyone. For instance, if ten are many and two few, we take the mean of the thing if we take six; since it exceeds and is exceeded by the same amount; this then is the mean according

to arithmetic proportion. But we cannot arrive thus at the mean relative to us. Let ten lbs. of food be a large portion for someone and two lbs. a small portion; it does not follow that a trainer will prescribe six lbs., for maybe even this amount will be a large portion, or a small one, for the particular athlete who is to receive it.... In the same way then one with understanding in any matter avoids excess and deficiency, and searches out and chooses the mean – the mean, that is, not of the thing itself but relative to us. (1106a29-b8; cf. EE II.5, 1222a23-37)

“The mean according to arithmetic proportion” is a point, a fixed and determinate amount. We cannot arrive at the mean relative to us by this method, for at least four reasons. First, the mean relative to us need not be equidistant from two opposed extremes the way an arithmetic mean is. Secondly, unlike an arithmetic mean, the mean relative to us is “of considerable range and not indivisible” (On *Generation and Corruption* 334b26-30); by this Aristotle means that it is not an extensionless point. Thirdly, as we have seen, Aristotle’s target simile suggests that there is room for variation among shots all of which hit the target. What virtue or excellence demands is not a fixed and determinate act or emotional response on a particular occasion, but that our acts and emotions fall within a certain more or less precisely delineated range. Aristotle himself points out that in practical matters the arithmetic mean is not particularly useful (see, e.g., *Topics* 139b21, 149a35-b4; *On the Heavens* 312b2). Fourthly, each of us is different; the mean relative to us will consequently also be different, and cannot be determined without close attention to features of the persons to whom such means are relative and the circumstances in which those persons are placed. The importance of this will become clear when I turn in section II to discussing particular Aristotelian virtues.

Seen one way, then, the possibilities for error are indefinitely various. Any shot that misses the mark in any direction qualifies. There is a sense, then, in which the remark Aristotle quotes at 1106b35 – “there is but one way to act nobly, many ways to act basely” – is true. Seen another way, however, the recipe for such

error is absolutely precise: any shot that lands anywhere beyond the fixed edge of the target counts. This comports well with what Aristotle says earlier about excellence of character, that there is nothing fixed and invariable about matters of excellent or virtuous conduct (1104a4-12); the excellent thing to do is anything which falls within a certain range. What is excellent depends upon circumstances, just as the appropriate amount of food or exercise does. It cannot be determined with arithmetic precision (1104a1-6).

There are, however, emotions and acts which are absolutely vicious and disgraceful and are so in ways that do not depend upon circumstances. Aristotle's examples are malice, shamelessness, and envy (emotions), and adultery, theft, and murder (acts) (see, e.g., 107a12-26; cf. EE 1221b18-26). There cannot be commendable or praiseworthy exercises of malice, shamelessness, and envy; nor can one deserve praise for committing adultery, theft, or murder.

So Aristotle is not saying that one's emotions should always be of moderate intensity, or that one's acts should always express moderate amounts of particular emotions. The view that one should be moderate in everything is (*pace* the opening passage from Williams) not a fair statement of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Some things – the acts and feelings just mentioned – should never be done or felt; other things should be done or felt with our whole being (1166a15-23; 1169a18-36).

## II

Aristotle points out that a general account of the mean is not likely to be helpful without concrete examples (1107a28-30; cf. EE II.3, 1221b8-9). In the course of Books II, III, and IV of the NE he discusses many virtues and their corresponding vices, arguing that in each case the virtue involves the observance of a mean between extremes. For example, in discussing *andreia*, courage, in Book III Aristotle suggests that it “is the observance of the mean regarding fear and confidence” (1115a6; see, however, the entire passage: 1115a6-1116a3). Aristotle does not, as some commentators have suggested, think of fear as the opposite or absence of confidence, or of confidence as the opposite or absence of fear.<sup>[5]</sup> Rather these are

two distinct variables which can vary independently of one another. There are therefore several ways one can fail to hit the mean with respect to these variables. One can on a given occasion display too much fear and too much confidence; we have no special name for this kind of person, but while he puts on a show of courage, he does not endure (1115b31-33). One can display too much fear and not enough confidence; this is the coward. One can display too little fear and too much confidence; this is the rash person. Lastly, one can display too little fear and not enough confidence; this person is crazy or insensible.

J.O. Urmson suggests that Aristotle has in effect presented us with two continua:[6]

cowardice <-----> insensitive fearlessness

lack of confidence <-----> overconfidence

Emotions and acts can fall anywhere on the first continuum, and anywhere on the second. The courageous person observes the mean regarding fear and confidence; he avoids the errors listed above. The mean with respect to the first variable need not correspond exactly with the mean with respect to the second, for the variables are independent of one another. And, further, there is no particular point on the continuum from cowardice to insensitive fearlessness to which his act must correspond; neither is there such a point on the continuum from lack of confidence to overconfidence. The courageous person hits the mark; as we have seen, Aristotle's target simile suggests that this does not imply that there is room for only one excellent or commendable shot. His act or reaction falls within a range of acceptable alternatives on each continuum. What is acceptable depends at least in part on the circumstances. But what circumstances? And in what ways does what is excellent depend on these circumstances?

"The same things are not fearful to everyone" (1115b7). Some people are by nature confident and assured of themselves. Others are not. One who is naturally bold or overconfident may find it easy to conquer fear of certain things. A naturally timid person may not. Some people fear certain things and situations more than



other people do, and certain things and situations more than other things and situations. Because the mean is relative to the individual one cannot tell whether an individual deserves praise for being courageous unless one knows something about that person – specifically, about that concerning which she is especially fearful or fearless, unconfident or overconfident.

This is fine as far as it goes, but it is clear that Aristotle does not regard courage as simply a matter of landing a shot within a certain range on these two continua. The courageous person also avoids fearing the wrong objects, fearing things in the wrong ways and at the wrong times; and similarly, we are told, regarding situations inspiring confidence (1115b17-18).[7] Fearing the wrong objects or situations is not simply being too fearful, or fearing too many things; nor is fearing things in the wrong ways and at the wrong times simply fearing them too much. Likewise, being confident in the wrong ways and at the wrong time may involve being too confident, but it need not. Evidently the two-continuum picture is too simple.[8]

Aristotle introduces a further complicating element to his account of excellence as a mean when he looks more closely at courage in Book III, chapter 8 (see 1116a17-1117a26). Not every disposition which enables one to overcome fear and lack of confidence is equally excellent and commendable. In particular, citizen's courage [*politikê andreia*], the courage born of experience [*empeiria*] or of spirit [*thumos*], the courage of the merely optimistic [*hoi euelpides*] or the ignorant [*hoi agnoountes*], all enable their possessors to overcome fear and lack of confidence. But none of these dispositions is true courage; none is a genuine excellence of character.

True courage – unlike the five imposters Aristotle mentions – is a disposition in which fears and confidences are balanced and mastered “for the sake of the noble” (*tou kalou heneka*, 1115b12-13; *dia to kalon*, 1117b31).[9] So not only can one fail to hit the mark by being too fearful or not fearful enough, too confident or not confident enough; one can miss the mark by fearing the wrong things, by

fearing them in inappropriate ways or on wrong occasions; one can also miss the mark set by true courage by fearing the right things in the right ways and on the right occasions, but by not doing so (as we might put it) for the right reasons or in the right spirit. And this element in Aristotle's discussion resists unpacking by setting out continua.

Does this not show that Aristotle's language of excess and deficiency is too crude, that the model he suggests (the "unhelpful analytical model," as Williams puts it) is not apt? Or should we rather resist the quasi-quantitative analysis given the notions of excess and deficiency by the continuum model? Before turning to this matter it will be useful to consider another example of an Aristotelian excellence of character. Consider, then, what Aristotle says about *praotês*, even-temperedness, at 1125b27-1126a29. We have here at least five continua:

**FREQUENCY**

never <-----> always

**DEGREE**

too mildly <-----> too violently

**DURATION**

too short <-----> too long

**PEOPLE**

no one <-----> everyone

**PROVOKING CIRCUMSTANCES**

none <-----> everything

As in the case of courage, acts and feelings can fall anywhere on each of these continua. Each represents, in principle anyway, a distinct variable, and each varies independently of the other four. There are, then, any number of ways to miss the mark with respect to anger. One can display anger too frequently or not frequently enough, too mildly or too violently, for too short a time or for too long a time; one can feel anger toward people who have done nothing to make anger appropriate or fail to feel anger toward people who have done something to which anger is a proper

response; one can feel anger at insignificant things or fail to feel anger at important wrongs.

This is sufficient to show that Williams's claim that according to Aristotle "every virtue... lies between two correlative faults or vices" rests on an oversimple view of the doctrine of the mean. But this picture, replete as it is with possibilities for error, still does not capture an important part of what Aristotle is saying. Getting angry at the wrong people (1126a14) is not primarily a matter of getting angry at too many people. Nor is getting angry on occasions when anger is uncalled for (1126a18-20) a simple matter of feeling anger too often. And not getting angry when one should get angry (1126a4-9) cannot fairly be characterized as simply getting angry on too few occasions, or as a simple matter of reacting too mildly. Once again the continuum model seems misleading. The errors Aristotle is talking about cannot be so easily characterized. Excess and deficiency, it seems, are not to be unpacked in the simple quantitative way the continuum model suggests.

True even-temperedness, like true courage and any other true excellence of character, is "for the sake of the noble." Of course this makes it possible to miss the mark in even more ways. It is possible, I suppose, to attend scrupulously to my liability to anger, taking care not to be too violently angered by situations, or angry at the wrong people, or for too long a time; if I do this simply to impress others with my self-mastery or from fear of being blamed by someone, this is not genuine Aristotelian even-temperedness. It is not done for the sake of the noble. Not only must my acts and reactions fall within the proper range on the continua set out above; they must do so for the right reasons, in the right spirit. Excellence of character demands that excellent states be sought and chosen for the sake of the noble.

As in the case of courage, we cannot tell whether a person deserves commendation for her temper unless we know something about her – in particular, about what she is especially provoked by, what sorts of situations and people she is especially sensitive to, and so on. People differ widely in these respects. Some people are

naturally quick-tempered; others are so as a product of upbringing. Some others are at the opposite extreme: nothing provokes their anger, and they spend their lives getting stepped on like doormats. A naturally slow-tempered person may find it easy to deal with some (not necessarily all) anger-provoking situations. A naturally hot-tempered one may not, and her hot temper may flare only in certain settings and not others.

### III

We are now in a position to see why the simple quantitative model will not do as an account of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. First, avoiding extremes is only one necessary condition for hitting a particular dispositional mean-state. It is not sufficient. The extremes must be avoided for the right reasons, for the sake of the noble. Secondly, how the extremes are best avoided is not as simple as the continuum model suggests. We do not effectively avoid the extremes simply by seeking moderation in everything. We do not avoid the extremes simply by aiming to land a shot within a certain range on (even several) one-dimensional continua, hard as that might be. What is excellent or commendable does typically lie within such a range, but its excellence or commendability consists of more than its place on various continua.

Here, I think, is where the target and archery similes are most useful. Aristotle tells us that excellence, like an archer, aims at a target. Now an archer trying to hit a target must take into account various things which would cause him to miss the mark. He must (since he cannot possibly hold his bow perfectly still) coordinate his release of the bowstring with the subtle movements of the bow. If there are strong crosswinds he must aim slightly into the wind, and the wind will blow his arrow onto the part of the target he wishes to hit. If he is aiming into the wind, he must aim high to compensate for the slowing effect of the wind. If he is aiming from the crest of a hill above the target, he must adjust for the effects of gravity. And so on. Hitting the mark involves being aware of, and adjusting for, factors like these.

Our emotional constitutions provide us with a set of these

complicating factors which can cause us to miss the mark, and will do so if we do not compensate for them. Each of us will, e.g., in trying to act or react courageously, have to make adjustments for different crosswinds. If I am naturally timid, I may in some settings have to aim toward what is rash to overcome the effects of my timidity. A naturally confident person, on the other hand, would be blown in the opposite direction; she must in certain circumstances aim at what is timid to avoid being blown further toward the rash. Likewise, a naturally slow-tempered person may have to work very hard to get angry at certain things he is naturally prone to endure meekly. The hot-tempered or bitter person might have to aim at what is timid in order to counteract her tendency, under particular sorts of conditions, to fly off the handle at slight provocations. These are the things of which an equable temper is made.

This is one of the reasons why Aristotle says that particular excellences of character involve observing a mean relative to us. It is also why he says that the mean relative to us cannot be determined with arithmetic precision: where we should aim to hit the mean will vary a great deal depending on the kinds and directions of crosswinds, headwinds and tailwinds; their strength; whether they are constant or intermittent; whether or not there are gusts; whether there are variations in the terrain which might produce unusual pockets of turbulence. Hitting a target in conditions like these is not a matter of fixing one's sight unwaveringly on one particular point (the geometrical center of the bulls-eye); it involves close attention to, and adjustment for, a variety of factors which would otherwise make us miss the mark. Hitting the mark is a matter of active, engaged participation in a complex situation. How, and how much, and when, and in what ways we should adjust is not something that can be said prior to close attention to the circumstances of the situation. There is no procedure we can go through which will enable us to fix in advance the location of the mean. (It is worth noting that the verb *stochazesthai*, literally "to take aim," e.g. at a target, is used in the NE and some contemporary works of a kind of skilled guesswork, an experimental use of reason

which is sensitive to the details of particular situations (see, e.g., 1106b15; 1109a30; 1126b29; 1127a6-8; 1128a6; 1129b15; 1141b13-16; cf. *Politics* 1266b28; 1324b7; *Rhetoric* 1395b10; cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 465A2; *Philebus* 55E-56A; *Laws* 635A2, 962D1-5; cf. *On Ancient Medicine*, chapter 9). Our word “stochastic” has some of these connotations, though unlike its Greek ancestor it suggests randomness.)

Hitting the mark set by particular virtues, as we have seen, requires acting or reacting for the sake of the noble. An archer who is good at hitting the bullseye of a target under difficult conditions can use his skill to miss the mark when he finds occasion to do so, e.g. when someone has paid him to throw a match. He can use his skill as well for unworthy purposes – destruction of property, e.g., or paid assassinations. Genuine excellences of character cannot be bought off in this manner. The excellent person’s marksmanship is for the sake of the noble. Facility in hitting the mark, however commendable and essential to excellence of character, is not sufficient. But then Aristotle’s talk of excess and deficiency is not adequately unpacked in the way the continuum model suggests. Avoiding extremes of excess and deficiency is a necessary condition of true excellence of character, but is not by itself sufficient for such excellence. Excellence or virtue is not mere skill.

#### IV

All this makes it very hard to say in advance with any precision where the mean lies relative to us:

it is not easy to define [*ou radion diorisai*] how and with whom and on what grounds and how long one should be angry, and up to what point one does correctly in so doing and where error begins.... Now how far and in what way someone must overstep to be blameworthy is not easy to set out by principle [*ou radion tōi logōi apodounai*], since what matters here are the details of the case, and the judgment lies in perception [*en tēi aisthēsei hē krisis*]. (1126a32-34, b2-4)

And it is no easy matter to hit the mean, as Aristotle insists in a number of places (1109a25-29, 1109b13-24; cf. *EE* II.5, 1222a11-b4).

Still, Aristotle has some general advice to offer those who are aiming at, trying to observe, the mean:

What is necessary first in aiming at the mean is to avoid that extreme which is the more opposed to the mean.... Since of the two extremes one is a more serious error than the other, and since hitting the mean accurately is hard, the second-best thing... is to take the lesser of the evils. The best way to do this is as we said. We must also attend to what we ourselves are most prone to, for different people naturally incline to different faults.... We must drag ourselves away in the opposite direction, for if we stay away from error we will attain the mean. And we must beware especially of what is pleasurable; none of us is an unbiased judge when it comes to pleasant things... All this makes it apparent that it is the mean disposition in every case that is to be praised, but also that sometimes we must lean to the side of excess and sometimes to that of deficiency, for this is the easiest way of hitting the mean and of doing well. (1109a30-b27; cf. 1108b11-1109a19)

What Aristotle is saying here is this. To determine where the mean lies in a particular case, and what the observance of the mean demands, I must attend to the details of the case. Among these details are those concerning my own character. I must realize, and adjust for, the aptnesses I have to various sorts of errors, most noticeably those involving excesses and deficiencies. I must compensate for my tendencies to over- or under-react, my susceptibilities to certain things and situations, my prejudices and biases. This may require that I overcompensate, aiming at what (were I to land a shot there) would be wide of the mark. I must realize that certain settings bring out the worst in me, and try to avoid those settings, or (again) compensate for their tendency to bring out the worst in me. And I should be especially wary of aspects of situations which I find pleasurable: pleasure – and the prospect of pleasure – is likely to impair my judgment, and it makes it very hard to find, let alone consistently hit, the mean.

All this seems to me very sound advice. That it is procedural and schematic, not substantive and informative; that it is not precise;

that it does not by itself provide me with detailed and unambiguous guidance in particular cases, would not have bothered Aristotle. All that can be offered at this level of generality is a sketch (1094b19-23). Detailed informative advice comes only after close attention to particular cases (the point, after all, of the archery simile); in aiming at the mark we must “look to what suits the occasion” (1104a10).<sup>[10]</sup>

In general and for the most part, however, human beings are more liable to certain excesses and deficiencies than to others (see, e.g. EE II.5, 1222a38-b4). It may be that most of us are more prone to err to the right-hand side of the continua above; there may be some feature of human nature which accounts for this. Few of us are naturally prone to be too liberal with our possessions; in most the tendency is to the opposing extreme (see e.g. 1121a17-29). In some cases, then, one extreme is “more opposed to” the mean than the others – and these will have to be compensated for by most people trying to hit the mean.

Still, there is no general way, no algorithm or principle, to fix or define the mean in particular cases. What is necessary, Aristotle says in many places, is *aisthêsis*, perception or sensitivity (see, e.g. 1109b23; 1142a27; 1147a26; 1172a36). The details of particular situations, which are too fine for coarse-grained rules to capture, can be caught by careful perception. Aristotle makes this point at 1109b22-23 and 1126b4-5 by contrasting matters which can be defined or set out by principle [*tôi logôi aphorisaî, tòi logôi apodounai*] and those in which the judgment lies with perception [*en têi aisthêsei hê krisis*]. *Krisis* is judgment or discernment of the sort that rests on balanced and careful and active appreciation of the particulars of the case. As an archer aiming at a target, the person aiming at the mean must be sensitive to a very complex situation, and must be able to anticipate and adjust to minute changes in that situation:

in the case of...all the virtues there is a certain mark to aim at, on which the person who has reason fixes his gaze, and increases or relaxes the tension accordingly... (1138b21-23)

Aristotle argues in the paragraphs following this passage that the



person whose perception and discernment is most acute is the practically wise person. (This is why, in the account of excellence or virtue quoted above [1106b36-1107a2], it is in observance of a mean relative to us, determined by reason, as the practically wise person would determine it, that excellence consists.) The practically wise person has a knack for hitting the mean, hits it consistently in a wide variety of circumstances. She is the balanced person, the person who is ethically healthy and whose character and emotions and actions therefore exhibit “proper balance or proportion.” Aristotle is not suggesting that we blindly defer to this person’s judgments and opinions about where the mean lies. He does suggest, however, that the reactions, opinions and considered judgments of the practically wise person are important standards to which we may find it useful to appeal in deliberation. Still, in the situations we face the mark we are interested in hitting is a mean that is relative to us, not to the person of practical wisdom. Such a person may be good at hitting such a mark, but she cannot do it for us. She may be able to advise us; but it is up to us to hit the mark (1105b5-18).

## V

I have argued that Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean is not the simple (and false) platitude that we should seek everything “in moderation.” Nor is it “an unhelpful analytical model” of the sort suggested by the continuum model discussed in sections II and III. Nor is it the simple-minded view that “every virtue... lies between two correlative faults or vices.” And it cannot fairly be regarded as a rule or set of rules designed to tell us what, in particular cases, to do. Aristotle develops the notion of the mean, as we have seen, as part of his account of excellence or virtue. Excellence is preserved by the observance of the mean (1104a26). The best life for a human being, then, namely one which consists of “the active exercise of his psyche’s capacities in conformity with excellence” (1098a16-18), consists in the observance of the mean. Hitting the mean is not so much a matter of hitting one particular point on a target as it is a matter of avoiding the variety of mistakes it is possible to make in a complex situation. Observing the mean

– and so virtue or excellence – is primarily a matter of careful awareness and avoidance of errors. Excellence of character, like health, involves a balance of opposite tendencies to act and react, a capacity to respond in various ways when and as occasions demand. This is the crux of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Far from being, as Williams suggests, one of the "least useful parts of his system" it seems to me both central to that system and a helpful and illuminating piece of ethics.[\[11\]](#)

#### NOTES

1. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985), p. 36. [\[Back to text\]](#)
2. All unattached references to Aristotle's works are to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter "NE"). I shall refer to the *Eudemian Ethics* as "EE." [\[Back to text\]](#)
3. *On Breaths* 1, translated by W.H.S. Jones, *Hippocrates and the Fragments of Heracleitus* (Cambridge MA, 1923), volume 2, p. 229. [\[Back to text\]](#)
4. *Hamartanein*: forms of this verb appear frequently in the New Testament, where it is usually translated "to sin"; see, e.g., Romans 3:23; 7:7-25. [\[Back to text\]](#)
5. See e.g. H.H. Joachim, who takes confidence [*tharros*] to be "the contrary of" fear [*phobos*] – Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 1951), p. 117. Rackham, in the Loeb translation of the NE, comments that "in using *ta tharralea* ['situations inspiring confidence'] as the opposite of *ta phobera* ['situations inspiring fear'] Aristotle follows Plato, Rep. 450E, Protag. 359C, Lach. 195B, etc." (p. 156, note c). Leaving Plato out of it, these are misreadings of Aristotle. He is not suggesting that fears (or situations inspiring them) are "the opposite of" confidences (or situations inspiring them). For a sounder view see D.J. Allan, *The Philosophy of Aristotle* (London, 1970), p. 129. [\[Back to text\]](#)
6. See J.O. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973): 223-30, p. 230. [\[Back to text\]](#)
7. Successfully observing the mean involves achieving what is

right [*dei*] and avoiding what is wrong [*mê dei, ou dei*]: see 1104b20-26; 1106b18-24; 1107b27-28; 1109a26-30; 1115b15-19; 1115b34-35; 1118b22-27; 1119b16-18; 1120a10-11; 1120a25-26; 1120a32-34; 1120b3-4; 1120b20-24; 1120b29-31; 1121a20-26; 1121a29-31; 1122a32-34; 1125b31-35; 1126a9-11; 1126a14-15; 1126a32-34; 1126b5-7; 1128a1-2; 1142b27-28. [[Back to text](#)]

8. Rosalind Hursthouse makes this point against Urmson's way of construing the doctrine of the mean in her "A False Doctrine of the Mean," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1980-81): 57-72, at pp. 60-61. [[Back to text](#)]
9. These expressions are ubiquitous in the NE: for the former see, e.g., 1115b22, 1117a4-5, 1120a24, 1120a28, 1122b6-7, 1123a24-25; for the latter, 1116a11-12, 1116b2-3, 1116b31-32, 1117a16-17, 1117b7-9, 1119b16, 1121a1-2, 1121b1-2, 1121b4-5, 1121b9-10, 1126b32, 1127a4-5, 1168a33. [[Back to text](#)]
10. In the early pages of the NE Aristotle likens proper ethical procedure to both medicine and navigation (1104a3-10, e.g.; cf. 1097a11-14, 29-32; 1137b13-33; 1141a21-25, 31-34; 1180b7-28). That Aristotle finds archery, medical, and navigational similes illuminating of ethical matters is surely important, and says a lot about how Aristotle conceives of ethics, but I cannot discuss his use of these similes here. [[Back to text](#)]
11. I would like to thank Jon Moline for helpful discussion, and for his comments on drafts of this essay. [[Back to text](#)]

# 49. Virtue Ethics

## How does virtue ethics operate?

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.

## What kinds of questions are asked by virtue ethics?

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?”

## **How has virtue ethics been applied in the real world?**

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. In December 2014, Senator John McCain delivered a floor statement to the US Senate, condemning CIA interrogation methods. He deplored the use of torture by our country:

Torture’s failure to serve its intended purpose isn’t the main reason to oppose its use. I have often said, and will always maintain, that this question isn’t about our enemies; it’s

about us. It's about who we were, who we are and who we aspire to be. It's about how we represent ourselves to the world (McCain, 2014).

## What is the main weakness 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.

## 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?

## 50. Ethics of Care





**Care ethics, or “ethics of care”** places significance on relationships and humans’ interdependency on each other. It could be seen as related to virtue ethics because ‘caring’ is a type of virtue, and is universal because the impulse to care is present in all human societies.

In care ethics, the ethical actor considers what option would be, not just fair, but compassionate. Ethical decisions may be made because of emotional connections or attachments to others. Given a dilemma, you may choose one option because your loved one is involved, while another option may be more reasonable to you when the people involved are strangers.

Care ethicists argue that all of us have been or will be in a position of needing care, of being vulnerable, at various points in our lives. As such, society works best when we take care of each other. Virtuous people should want to help those who need help- not just to protect human rights, but because we care.

In *The Hunger Games*, the main character Katniss uses care ethics. When her younger sister, Prim, is selected for the Games and faces certain death, Katniss volunteers to take Prim’s place: not because she thinks the Games are wrong (deontology), nor because she thinks she’ll win (utilitarianism) but because she loves Prim and will do anything to protect her. During the games, her feelings of care

for Prim lead her to also act to protect Rue, a fellow contestant who reminds her of Prim.

PART VI

# CHAPTER 6: CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL ISSUES



# 51. Discrimination

**Discrimination based on sex and gender contributes to harassment, unequal treatment, and violence against women, girls, and transgender and gender non-conforming people.**

## *Learning Objective*

- Describe the forms of gender-based discrimination that exist in society today
- 

## *Key Points*

- Sexism or [gender](#) discrimination is [prejudice](#) or discrimination based on a person's [sex](#) or gender. It has been linked to [stereotypes](#) and [gender roles](#) and includes the belief that males are intrinsically superior to other sexes and genders.
- Sexism contributes to discrimination in the workplace and the wage gap that still exists between males and females today. Extreme sexism may foster sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence.
- [Transgender](#) inequality is the unequal protection and treatment that transgender people face in work, school, and society in general. Transphobia manifests as emotional disgust, fear, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed toward people who don't conform to society's gender

expectations.

- Transgender people are much [more](#) likely to experience harassment, bullying, and violence based on their gender identity; they also experience much higher rates of discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare, and education.
  - Transgender individuals of color—and especially transgender women of color—face additional financial, social, and [interpersonal](#) challenges as a result of structural racism in combination with transphobia and [misogyny](#).
- 

## *Terms*

- [cisgender](#)Of gender that matches one's binary natal sex; of people who identify with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth.
- [cissexism](#)The appeal to norms that enforce the gender binary and gender essentialism, resulting in the oppression of gender variant, non-binary, and trans identities; transphobia.
- [misogyny](#)Hatred or dislike of women or girls.

## *Full Text*

# Sexism and Gender Discrimination

Sexism or gender discrimination is prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender. Sexism can affect any sex that is marginalized or oppressed in a society; however, it is particularly

documented as affecting females. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles and includes the belief that males are intrinsically superior to other sexes and genders. Extreme sexism may foster sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence.

Occupational sexism involves discriminatory practices, statements, or actions, based on a person's sex, that occur in the workplace. One form of occupational sexism is wage discrimination. In 2008, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that while female employment rates have expanded, and gender employment and wage gaps have narrowed nearly everywhere, on average women still have 20 percent less chance to have a job and are paid 17 percent less than men. It also found that despite the fact that many countries, including the U.S., have established anti-discrimination laws, these laws are difficult to enforce. In the United States, women account for 47 percent of the overall labor force, and yet they make up only 6 percent of corporate CEOs and top executives. Some researchers see the root cause of this situation in the tacit discrimination based on gender, conducted by current top executives and corporate directors (who are primarily male).

This graph illustrates the median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, by sex, race, and ethnicity in the U.S., 2009. Across all races and ethnicities studied, women consistently earn less than men. This graph illustrates the median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, by sex, race, and ethnicity in the U.S., 2009. Across all races and ethnicities studied, women consistently earn less than men.

## Wage gap

This graph illustrates the median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, by sex, race, and ethnicity in the U.S., 2009.

Across all races and ethnicities studied, women consistently earn less than men.

Misogyny is the hatred or dislike of women or girls. According to feminist [theory](#), misogyny can be manifested in numerous ways, including sexual discrimination, belittling of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification of women. Although the exact rates are widely disputed, there is a large body of cross-cultural evidence that women are subjected to domestic violence significantly more often than men. In addition, there is broad consensus that women are more often subjected to severe forms of abuse and are more likely to be injured by an abusive partner. The United Nations recognizes domestic violence as a form of gender-based violence, which it describes as a human rights violation and a result of sexism.

## Transphobia and Transgender Discrimination

Transgender inequality is the unequal protection and treatment that transgender people face in work, school, and society in general. Currently, transgender individuals are not protected in 33 U.S. states from being fired for being transgender or not conforming to gender [norms](#). Transgender people regularly face transphobic harassment and violence. Ultimately, one of the largest [reasons](#) that transgender people face inequality is a lack of public understanding.

Transphobia is similar to [homophobia](#), racism, and sexism, and manifests as emotional disgust, fear, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed toward people who don't conform to society's gender expectations. The related term "[cissexism](#)" refers to the assumption that transgender people are inferior to [cisgender](#) people. Both transphobia and cissexism have severe consequences. Transgender



people are much more likely to experience harassment, bullying, and violence based on their gender identity; they also experience much higher rates of discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare, and education (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2010).

Transgender individuals of color face additional financial, social, and interpersonal challenges, in comparison to the transgender community as a whole, as a result of structural racism. According to the National Transgender Discrimination [Survey](#), the combination of anti-transgender [bias](#) with structural and individual racism means that transgender people of color experience particularly high levels of discrimination. Specifically, black transgender people reported the highest level of discrimination among all transgender individuals of color. As members of several intersecting minority groups, transgender people of color—and transgender women of color in particular—are especially vulnerable to employment discrimination, poor health outcomes, harassment, and violence. Consequently, they face even greater obstacles than white transgender individuals and cisgender members of their own race.

## 52. Sexism and Media Stereotypes

Making good ethical decisions requires practice in exploring the ethical aspects of a decision and weighing the considerations that will impact our choice of action. Unfortunately, the manner in which ethical issues are presented to the general public, for example, through the mass media is not always helpful. In five minute sections of the nightly news and in a variety of talk shows, “experts” exchange scripted ideas on complicated subjects such as abortion, living wage legislation, gay rights, physician assisted suicide, environmental issues, immigration, etc. There is generally little depth, and no indication that these discussions will lead to ongoing efforts to resolve them. Given that media content is also a persuasive type of communication, it can play an important role in promoting both positive and negative social values, thereby potentially influencing ethical decision-making.

### “Challenging Media Stereotypes”

Media has become a powerful tool of communication, and is pervasive in our lives through outlets such as broadcast media, film, theater, the arts, and of course, television, print and web. Whether or not media content is contributing positively to our value systems is debatable. What is not debatable is that that university students will consume up to 7 ½ -10 hours per day of media content, so the need for students to have more skill in disseminating it becomes imperative.

The following activity asks students to take the iconography of

Barbie, and create a new message that challenges the stereotypes ascribed to gender.

Perhaps no media artifact represents American perceptions of beauty more than the plastic toy doll, Barbie. Barbie is an American cultural icon that is an idealized model of what many young girls (and, yes, some boys) aspire to look like and/or expect in life. These standards are of course not limited to just being thin and beautiful, but also to a particular race, class, and definition of femininity as well. Barbie is not the sole determinant or influence, of course, to how we decide to treat one another, but in order to affect decision-making, in this case about gender, we can show students how they have the power to alter messaging.

The assignment calls for:

1. Consideration about how Barbie represents and sets standards for girls, women, and men to aspire to.
2. Modifying the Barbie to challenge these standards.
3. Creativity and effort count!



## 53. Food Ethics

<https://ethics.utep.edu/Documents/Ethics%20Infographic.pdf>



### *Exercises*

#### **What Does Your Ethical Hamburger Look Like?**

Consider the following questions:

- How will your choices affect the price of the hamburger?
- How will your choices affect jobs?
- How will your choices affect the environment?

- How will your choices affect health?

# 54. Journalism Ethics

Journalism ethics and standards describe the principles of ethics and good practice journalists adopt in response to specific challenges.

## *Learning Objective*

- Summarize the key components of ethical journalism
- 

## *Key Points*

- Codes of journalism are designed to guide [journalists](#) through numerous ethical challenges, such as [conflict of interest](#). A conflict of interest occurs when a single individual or organization adopts multiple interests, one of which could potentially corrupt the [incentive](#) to pursue another.
- According to the accuracy and standards for factual reporting, [reporters](#) are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted and the space available, and to seek only reliable sources. In addition, events with a single eyewitness are to be reported with attribution.
- [Independent](#) fact-checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable. A [fact checker](#) is the person who checks factual assertions in non-fictional text (usually intended for publication in a periodical) to determine their veracity and correctness.
- Harm limitation addresses the question of whether all

information gathered should be reported, and if so, how. This principle of limitation creates a practical and ethical dilemma by acknowledging that some attention must be given to the negative consequences of full [disclosure](#).

- News style is the prose style used for news reporting in [media](#) such as [newspapers](#), radio and television.
  - News writing attempts to answer every basic question about a particular event– who, what, when, where, why, and often how– at the opening of the article. This method of composition is sometimes called the “inverted pyramid”.
- 

## *Terms*

- [fact checker](#)A fact checker is the person who checks factual assertions in non-fictional text (usually intended for publication in a periodical) to determine their veracity and correctness. The job requires general, wide-ranging knowledge and the ability to conduct quick and accurate research.
  - [journalism ethics and standards](#)Journalism ethics and standards describe the principles of ethics and good practice journalists adopt in response to specific challenges.
  - [conflict of interest](#)A situation in which someone in a position of trust, such as a lawyer, insurance adjuster, a politician, executive or director of a corporation or a medical research scientist or physician, has competing professional or personal interests.
-



## *Example*

- According to the Columbia Journalism Review, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* runs “most likely the world’s largest fact checking operation,” employing the equivalent of eighty full-time fact checkers as of 2010.

## *Full Text*

# Introduction

Journalism ethics and standards describe the principles of ethics and good practice journalists adopt in response to specific challenges. Historically and currently, journalists consider the subset of media ethics as their professional “code of ethics” or “canons of journalism”. These basic codes and canons commonly appear in statements drafted by professional journalism associations and individual print, broadcast, and online news organizations. While various existing codes have some differences, most share common elements: notably, the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, [impartiality](#), fairness and public accountability as they apply to the [acquisition](#) of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public.

# Codes of Journalism

Codes of journalism are designed to guide journalists through numerous ethical challenges, such as conflict of interest. The codes and canons provide journalists with a framework for self-monitoring and self-correction. A conflict of interest occurs when

a single individual or organization adopts multiple interests, one of which could potentially corrupt the incentive to pursue another. The United [States](#) and Europe have typically been considered pioneers in the [formulation](#) and [adoption](#) of these standards, though similar codes can be found in nearly any country that enjoys freedom of the press. While the written codes and practical standards of journalism vary somewhat from country to country and organization to organization, they tend to overlap substantially between mainstream publications and societies.

## Common elements

In accordance with the accuracy and standards for factual reporting, reporters are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted and the space available for story preparation, and to seek only reliable sources. In addition, events with a single eyewitness are to be reported with attribution. Events with two or more independent eyewitnesses may be reported as facts. Controversial facts are reported with attribution. Moreover, independent fact-checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable. A fact checker is the person who checks factual assertions in non-fictional text (usually intended for publication in a periodical) to determine their veracity and correctness. The job requires general, wide-ranging knowledge and the ability to conduct quick and accurate research. According to the Columbia Journalism Review, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* runs “most likely the world’s largest fact checking operation,” employing the equivalent of eighty full-time fact checkers as of 2010.

During the normal course of an assignment, a reporter might go about a variety of tasks— gathering facts and details, conducting interviews, doing research, background checks, taking photos, videotaping, recording sound. Harm limitation addresses the question of whether all information gathered should be reported,

and if so, how. This principle of limitation creates a practical and ethical dilemma by acknowledging that some attention must be given to the negative consequences of full disclosure.

## News Style

Ethical standards should not be confused with the common standards of quality of presentation. News style is the prose style used for news reporting in media such as newspapers, radio and television. News style requires not only a unique vocabulary and sentence structure, but also a particular manner of presentation—the situational importance of tone and intended audience, for instance. News writing attempts to answer every basic question about a particular event— who, what, when, where, why and often how— at the opening of the article. This method of composition is sometimes called the “inverted pyramid” , named for the decreasing importance of information in subsequent paragraphs.

image

Media coverage strongly influences people’s perception of politics, society, and culture.

### *Learning Objective*

- Name some of the central critiques of American news organizations

## Key Points

- Perhaps the most important political function of the [media](#) is to put together a set of national priorities.
  - [Agenda setting](#) may be limited within a domestic political context because of the competition for audience interest.
  - American news media emphasizes more than ever the “horse race” aspects of the presidential [campaign](#). This has led to criticism that audiences are not being given more substantive information about [policy](#).
- 

## Term

- [horse race](#) An exciting and arduous competition (as in a political campaign).

## Full Text

Media [coverage](#) strongly influences people's perception of [politics](#), society, and culture. The political analyst and [consultant](#) Gary Wasserman attests that media institutions' “most important political function” is to play the role of an “agenda setter,” where they “[put] together an agenda of national priorities – what should be taken seriously, what lightly, what not at all.”

Agenda-setting is somewhat limited within domestic politics. Due to the commercialized context within which they work, media institutions must compete for audience interest and can often not afford to ignore an important issue which another television station, [newspaper](#), or radio station is willing to pick up. In regards to [foreign policy](#), agenda-setting could take place in areas in which

very few Americans have direct experience of the issues at hand. In addition, the U.S. media has been accused of prioritizing domestic news over international news, as well as focusing on U.S. military action abroad over other international stories.

American news media emphasizes more than ever the “horse race” aspects of the presidential campaign, according to a new study. Coverage of the [political campaigns](#) have been less reflective on the issues that matter to voters. Instead, the media has focused primarily on campaign tactics and strategy, according to a report conducted jointly by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, part of the Pew Research Center, and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of [Government](#) at Harvard University. The report examined 1,742 stories that appeared from January through May 2007 in 48 news outlets. Almost two-thirds of all stories in U.S. news media, including print, television, radio and online, focused on the political aspects of the campaign, while only one percent focused on the [candidates’](#) public records. Only 12 percent of stories seemed relevant to voters’ decision-making. The rest of the stories focused more on tactics and strategy. Many criticize this shift in emphasis for depriving audiences of substantive information about candidates’ policy [platforms](#) .

image

## News Coverage

Press tables at a Barack Obama rally.

# 55. Global Health Ethics

## Global health and national borders: the ethics of foreign aid in a time of financial crisis

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### Abstract

#### Background

The governments and citizens of the developed nations are increasingly called upon to contribute financially to health initiatives outside their borders. Although international development assistance for health has grown rapidly over the last

two decades, austerity measures related to the 2008 and 2011 global financial crises may impact negatively on aid expenditures. The competition between national priorities and foreign aid commitments raises important ethical questions for donor nations. This paper aims to foster individual reflection and public debate on donor responsibilities for global health.

## Methods

We undertook a critical review of contemporary accounts of justice. We selected theories that: (i) articulate important and widely held moral intuitions; (ii) have had extensive impact on debates about global justice; (iii) represent diverse approaches to moral reasoning; and (iv) present distinct stances on the normative importance of national borders. Due to space limitations we limit the discussion to four frameworks.

## Results

Consequentialist, relational, human rights, and social contract approaches were considered. Responsibilities to provide international assistance were seen as significant by all four theories and place limits on the scope of acceptable national autonomy. Among the range of potential aid foci, interventions for health enjoyed consistent prominence. The four theories concur that there are important ethical responsibilities to support initiatives to improve the health of the worst off worldwide, but offer different rationales for intervention and suggest different implicit limits on responsibilities.

## Conclusions

Despite significant theoretical disagreements, four influential accounts of justice offer important reasons to support many current initiatives to promote global health. Ethical argumentation can complement pragmatic reasons to support global health interventions and provide an important foundation to strengthen collective action.

## Keywords

Developing countries Ethics International Agencies International Cooperation Voluntary Health Agencies World Health

## Background

In keeping with the vision of “a more peaceful, prosperous and just world” enshrined in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [1], initiatives to improve global health and human development have proliferated over the last decade [2, 3, 4, 5]. Although developing countries play the leading role, the success of these strategies depends critically on the participation of the citizens and governments of the donor nations (principally, the state members of the Group of Eight Countries (G8) and the European Union) through financial assistance and supportive policies. International development assistance for health (DAH) has enjoyed a special priority among donors in recent years [6]. Resources quadrupled from \$5.6 billion in 1990 to \$21.8 billion in 2007, and the rate of growth accelerated sharply after 2002 [6].

The future of global health financing is much more uncertain. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 has placed aid budgets



under pressure [7]. Although DAH continued to expand between 2007 and 2010, the rate of growth slowed dramatically [8]. Competition among global health priorities may also have intensified. In 2010, world leaders endorsed an ambitious new scheme to reach the MDGs by the 2015 target date through a focus on the health of the most vulnerable women and children [9]. Yet, funding for international assistance for HIV and AIDS provided by donor governments declined by 10 per cent over the 2009–2010 period, marking the first time year-to-year support for HIV and AIDS has fallen in more than a decade [10].

It is too early to know what the 2011 Eurozone crisis will mean for global health funding; however, a slowdown in global growth [11] and fiscal austerity in Europe and elsewhere will almost certainly put additional downward pressure on meeting aid targets [12, 13, 14]. The United States Congress is now considering the first significant cuts in overseas aid in nearly two decades, on the order of \$12 billion, or 20 per cent of the President's request for 2012 [15, 16].

The competition between national priorities and foreign aid commitments raises important ethical questions. For some, the motivation to support global health is based on a principle of universal solidarity among human beings [3]. However, for many, national borders delimit the prime locus of moral responsibility. The duty to alleviate suffering abroad is seen as discretionary, and distinctly secondary to domestic concerns. Two arguments dovetail to support this latter perspective. A realist conception of international relations suggests that the proper role of every national government is to represent and advance the interests of its own nation. Similarly, many ethicists hold that we have more important moral duties towards co-nationals, with whom we share a common past, the benefits and burdens of social cooperation, and a common destiny [17]. The view that “charity begins at home” may seem particularly salient in the current context of financial uncertainty and the prospect of a global economic recession.

To ensure that global health priorities receive adequate and stable funding it will be essential not only to demonstrate the effectiveness

of interventions and programmes [8], but also to clarify the reasons for our commitment to this goal. Theories of justice offer sophisticated frameworks through which moral choices and responsibilities can be analysed. Through a non-technical introduction to a range of influential theories from the ethics literature, this paper aims to foster individual reflection and public debate on donor responsibilities for global health. We also hope to illustrate the value of this approach in clarifying policy commitments that can be widely upheld under conditions of reasonable moral pluralism [18].

## Methods

This article critically reviews several contemporary accounts of justice important in the Western canon. Study selection followed a three-part procedure balancing author expertise (MJ, RC, and AJD have PhDs in philosophy with specialisation in ethics; RC and AJD hold academic positions as ethicists; TS, a social scientist, has published extensively on health ethics, global justice and human rights) and validation by qualified peers. (1) The authors first established a list of four criteria to be satisfied. Individual theories should: (i) articulate important and widely held moral intuitions, and (ii) have had extensive impact on debates about global justice. Collectively, they should: (iii) represent diverse approaches to moral reasoning, and (iv) present distinct stances on the normative importance of national borders. (2) Authors next generated an inclusive list of candidate theories, and shortened it through application of these criteria. (3) Finally, results were validated and refined on two separate occasions by specialists in global public health, ethics, and political philosophy. Additional file 1 contains a detailed description of the procedure.

Due to space limitations we limit the discussion to four frameworks. As we shall show, each suggests different conclusions

about the nature and extent of our obligations to promote global health. Each theory is open to objections, which we do not wish to minimise or ignore; nor do we wish to endorse any particular position. We focus instead on areas of agreement. Our claim is that all of these views will accord to global health a serious moral importance implying substantial responsibilities that generally are not satisfied by current efforts.

## Results

We reviewed four theories representing consequentialist (Singer), relational (Pogge), human rights (Shue), and social contract (Rawls) approaches. These theories represent a variety of views on the normative significance of national borders.

### Four theories of justice

Cosmopolitans view all human beings as belonging (at least, potentially) to a single community. We discuss the most radically cosmopolitan theory of justice first, working through to the conception most clearly favourable to foregrounding the normative significance of national borders. Table 1 provides an overview of the four theories, Table 2 presents common objections to each view, and Table 3 offers examples of the types of policies that could be supported by each approach [19].

Table 1

**Importance of the health of the global poor<sup>1</sup> on four accounts of justice**

|  | Singer  | Pogge  | Shue   | Rawls   |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Addressed to whom?</b>                      | Individual moral agents   | Individuals & national governments   | Individuals & national governments   | National governments & their peoples  |
| <b>National borders important?</b>             | No  | Possibly   | Yes  | Yes   |
| <b>Key concepts</b>                            | Individuals have an obligation to prevent the occurrence of something significantly bad if they can do so at acceptable cost to themselves. | We have a duty not to cause severe harm for minor gain. This obligation remains equally valid if an agent is responsible for causing harm in a jurisdiction outside his or her national borders, and is independent of whether we should privilege obligations to compatriots. | Two basic rights – subsistence and security–constitute pre-conditions for the enjoyment and exercise of all other rights and freedoms. Liberal democratic states have a duty to adopt foreign policies consistent with these fundamental human rights. | Under an idealised form of social contract, representatives of free and equal societies would adopt 8 principles of governance that enable an ideal global community to live together over time in peace, harmony and mutual respect. |
| <b>Is health of the global poor important?</b> | Yes   | Yes, under certain conditions  | Yes, to a limited extent   | Yes, if useful to achieve just political arrangements   |

|  | Singer   | Pogge  | Shue   | Rawls  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Why?</b>                                  | The global rich can ameliorate the suffering of the global poor with little sacrifice to themselves. | The international community is in some instances causally implicated in the genesis and perpetuation of severe poverty and ill health worldwide. | In instances where national governments fail to protect basic rights, others have a duty to guarantee their fulfilment. The right to subsistence guarantees every person worldwide a decent chance at a long and healthy life. | The 8 principles include a duty to “assist other peoples living under unfavourable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime.” Empirical evidence shows that population health contributes to just political arrangements. |
| <b>What kind of obligation?</b><br>2         | Justice  | Justice  | Justice  | Justice or charity <sup>3</sup>  |
| <b>What is the extent of the obligation?</b> | Until suffering has been eliminated  | Until causal responsibility for harm has been corrected and adequately compensated <sup>4</sup>  | Until a basic minimum has been provided  | Until the international community has enabled burdened societies to develop just political arrangements  |

|  | Singer   | Pogge  | Shue   | Rawls  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Which health-related strategies should be privileged?</b> | Poverty alleviation & action on other determinants of health | Examination of national policy coherence to avoid causing or contributing to harms abroad; | Examination of national policy coherence to avoid depriving or contributing to deprivation abroad;   | Those that strengthen basic institutions to a minimally decent threshold, enabling further social development. Candidate strategies could (1) promote equality of opportunity (especially in education and training), e.g. through child health; (2) offer additional synergies for development, e.g. by focussing on the rights and fundamental interests of women. |
|  | Provision of health care                                     | Analysis of the effects of global institutions   | Provision of aid to ensure subsistence rights <sup>6</sup> , including guarantees related to the social determinants of health and minimal preventive health care. |  |
|  |  | Institutional reforms to promote satisfaction of human rights <sup>5</sup>                 |  |  |

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank defines poverty as “pronounced deprivation in

well-being” comprising multiple dimensions such as low incomes and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity, low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of voice, and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one’s life. The global poor are poor in an absolute sense [20].

<sup>2</sup> Each theory takes a position on the question of whether duties towards the health of those outside our borders are matters of “justice” or “charity”. Duties of justice are precise, owed to specifiable others, and can in principle be legally enforced, whereas duties of charity admit of discretion in relation to their nature, timing, and choice of beneficiary. Charitable duties are adopted through conscious choice and are not legally enforceable.

<sup>3</sup> For Rawls, the duty to assist is a duty of justice under the principles of the Law of Peoples. Beyond the threshold of minimal decency, the duty to assist becomes charity.

<sup>4</sup> According to Pogge, degree of responsibility is proportional to benefits reaped and is discharged when proportional compensation is made [21].

<sup>5</sup> For Pogge, a guarantee of human rights aims to confer on all human beings worldwide “secure access” to “minimally adequate shares” of basic freedoms of participation, of food, drink, clothing, shelter, education and health care [22].

<sup>6</sup> For Shue, minimal economic security, or subsistence, entails “unpolluted air, unpolluted water, adequate food, adequate clothing, adequate shelter, and minimal preventive public health care [23].

Table 2

**Common criticisms of the four theories<sup>1</sup>**

|                     | Criticisms   | Rejoinders  |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Singer <sup>2</sup> | Moral priorities should focus on local need, for reasons similar to those raised in relation to national borders.  | Singer allows that <i>psychologically</i> it might make a difference whether an individual is in severe need in front of one's eyes or in a far-away country, but that it makes no <i>moral</i> difference. |
|                     | Singer demands too much of individuals as there will always be further work to do to relieve suffering somewhere in the world. All of one's time could be spent relieving suffering, potentially endangering one's own well-being. | This is unlikely to pose a problem in practice. Singer's recent work aims to define attainable standards for living an ethical life in a world that contains great affluence and extreme poverty [24].      |
|                     | Any obligation to respond to the challenges of global health should be understood as one of charity rather than justice.   | For Singer, the severity of the suffering involved means that talk of charity is inappropriate. Provision of toys to children may be a fit subject for 'charity', but not meeting essential health needs.   |
| Pogge               | Does Pogge's analysis of harm cohere with ordinary usage? Does it satisfy the description of a negative duty (i.e. an injunction to refrain from doing something, in this case, causing harm)?                                     | Harm is always properly judged in relation to a subjunctive standard (i.e., the possibility of an alternative institutional order in which fewer serious harms are committed).                              |



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|              | Criticisms  | Rejoinders  |
|--------------|---|---|
|              | Is Pogge's empirical description of the global order accurate? Local factors such as poor governance or corruption are important in explaining the poverty of developing countries.   | Pogge emphasises that local and global factors often interact in complex ways, and that local factors may often have current or past non-local causes [25]. While it may often be sufficient to point either to local causes or to global causes to explain the persistence a phenomenon such as severe poverty or poor health status, this recognition cannot diminish the share of moral responsibility attributable to either set of factors [22]. |
| <b>Shue</b>  | Shue's concept of subsistence rights is indeterminate and may open the door to unduly extensive obligations   | The concept of subsistence rights is not designed to foster global economic equality and is sufficiently clear to guide foreign policy.   |
| <b>Rawls</b> | Individuals may be poorly served by a theory addressed primarily to peoples. One's nation of birth is a matter of luck rather than choice, and is hence morally arbitrary. It should not influence life chances unduly. In addition, citizens may not be well represented by their head of state. We have stronger duties towards individuals than Rawls's theory suggests. | If we address our theory to individuals rather than peoples, we risk undue interference in the domestic affairs of independent peoples and exceed the proper scope of justice.  |
|              | Is the thesis of explanatory nationalism, which holds that the key ingredient in how a country fares is its own political culture and traditions, correct?  | Depends on one's interpretation of empirical evidence.  |

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<sup>1</sup> These are criticisms commonly raised in the philosophical

literature and by no means represent an exhaustive list. Rejoinders presented are consistent with the authors' standpoint.

<sup>2</sup> A general criticism of all consequentialist approaches would be that factors other than consequences are relevant to determining moral duties. Singer, like other consequentialists, would disagree.

Table 3

**Examples of policies that cohere with each of the four accounts of justice**<sup>1,2</sup>

| Policies   | Singer | Pogge | Shue | Rawls |
|--|--------|-------|------|-------|
| Reform of international arrangements governing medical research and development <sup>3</sup>                   |        | X     | X    | X     |
| Sustainable domestic policies for high-income countries in relation to human resources for health <sup>4</sup> |        | X     | X    |       |
| Proportional compensation for the health effects of environmental pollution & climate change                   |        | X     | X    | X     |
| Ensuring transparency and coherence in the effects of foreign and domestic policies on health worldwide        |        | X     | X    |       |
| Reducing inequalities in health between countries through foreign and domestic policies                        |        |       |      |       |
| Reducing agricultural trade subsidies & other protectionist practices  |        | X     | X    | X     |
| Regulatory measures to contain speculation in financial and commodity markets                                  |        | X     |      |       |
| Meeting financial commitments to global development initiatives, such as 0.7% GDP                              | X      | X     | X    |       |
| Support for the health-related MDGs  | X      | X     | X    | X     |
| Support for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM)                                    | X      | X     | X    | X     |
| Support for the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI)   | X      | X     | X    | X     |
| Support for the UN Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health   | X      | X     | X    | X     |

<sup>1</sup> Several of these policies were drawn from the UK “Health is global” report [19].

<sup>2</sup> An “X” indicates that the policy would be supported. Detailed reasons are provided in the Additional file 2. Absence of an “X” means either that the answer is indeterminate (the theory is silent on these points) or negative.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS) agreement, and so-called “TRIPS plus” bilateral agreements.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, ceasing to underfund medical training at the domestic level and to import qualified professionals from the developing world.

Each theory will take a position on the question of whether duties towards the health of those outside our borders are matters of “justice” or “charity”. Duties of justice are precise, owed to specifiable others, and should in principle be legally enforceable, whereas duties of charity admit of discretion in relation to their nature, timing, and choice of beneficiary. Such obligations are not legally enforceable.

## Peter Singer and the requirement to aid others in need

Princeton University philosopher Peter Singer writes from the perspective of consequentialism, a family of theories whose unifying element is a focus on outcomes. Consequentialists believe that consideration of outcomes forms the relevant basis for deciding which policies and practices are morally correct. Approaches differ in terms of the types of consequences taken to matter most. Some versions may specify a single good, such as pleasure or the avoidance of pain [26], while others promote the satisfaction of preferences [27], or an objective list of several goods to be promoted

equally. Most forms of consequentialism focus on maximising beneficial outcomes, but this is not always the case.

Singer's argument about our obligations to others is general, simple and, if true, profound. For Singer, every human being has the capacity for suffering and enjoyment or happiness, and is thus deserving of equal consideration [27]. Contrasting the estimated 8.8 million child deaths worldwide in 2008 due to preventable, poverty-related causes [28] with the relative comfort in which almost 1 billion people live, Singer maintains that the global rich have an obligation to alleviate the suffering of the global poor. He argues that, if we can prevent something importantly bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do so. As the morbidity and premature death linked to extreme poverty is deeply bad and a significant proportion can be prevented without undue sacrifice, this ought to be done [24].

Singer's theory addresses itself to individuals and asks that each individual moral agent give the same weight to the interests of others as to his or her own. For Singer, the moral point of view is inherently radically impartial, surmounting specific attachments to individuals, communities and countries.

## Thomas Pogge on global institutions and the duty not to harm

Asking why severe poverty and inequality persist worldwide, Yale University's Thomas Pogge focuses on structural causes. Pogge asks whether the current global institutional order—for which the governments of the rich nations (and hence their citizens) bear primary responsibility—figures as a substantial contributor to the life-threatening poverty suffered by billions in the developing world [22].

Pogge challenges us to reflect on the relationship between the persistence of severe poverty and inequality worldwide and recent

decisions concerning our path of globalization [22]. While the legacy of colonialism persists, Pogge's argument focuses primarily on events since roughly 1980. He raises two issues: first, the governments of wealthy nations "enjoy a crushing advantage in terms of bargaining power and expertise;" and second, international negotiations are based on an adversarial system in which country level representatives seek to advance the best interests of their nation. Systematic consideration of the needs of the global poor is not a part of the mandate of any of the powerful parties to the negotiation. The cumulative results are, in Pogge's view, predictable: a grossly unfair global order in which benefits flow predominantly to the affluent [22].

What effect do these asymmetries have on the health of those in developing countries? First, decisions taken by global institutions, state actors or corporations may cause or aggravate problems in securing critical determinants of health. While severe poverty is arguably most important, climate change and environmental damage also affect health determinants such as air, water and food. Negative consequences disproportionately impact the global poor, while the benefits of development have fallen mainly to the affluent. Second, decisions have at times impeded the ability of developing country governments to provide health care to their own citizens, for example through structural adjustment or trade policies. For Pogge, a particularly important issue concerns essential medicines [29]. He believes that the global medical innovation system embodied in the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement is unjust. An independent commission confirmed that the benefits of the current system flow disproportionately towards rich countries [30].

Pogge invokes a central element of Western morality: it is wrong severely to harm innocent people for minor gains. The duty not to harm (a so-called negative duty, as distinct from positive duties like those to render assistance) is considered a strict obligation applicable equally to fellow citizens and foreigners. If Pogge is correct about the harm caused by our global institutions, this

implies that we have an immediate duty of justice to those harmed regardless of where they live [22].

There has been much debate about Pogge's proposal and the correct baseline for determining harm. Taking a "state of nature" perspective one might perhaps argue that, in the absence of something like the current global order, the global poor would have been no worse off.

This objection misconstrues Pogge's claim. Pogge proposes that we appeal to human rights as a minimum standard for judging the adequacy of institutions. Inspired by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states: "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized," [31] he argues that any justifiable international order must be designed insofar as reasonably possible to guarantee human rights including basic freedoms of participation, subsistence, education and health care. Pogge argues that the attribution of harm implicitly involves a "subjunctive" (as opposed to an historical) comparison, and that the correct subjunctive comparison would be the possibility of a feasible alternative institutional order in which fewer human rights deficits would be produced [21, 22, 25].

In sum, for Pogge, a set of global institutional arrangements is unjust if it foreseeably perpetuates large-scale human rights deficits that could reasonably be avoided through feasible institutional modifications. He amasses empirical evidence to demonstrate that the citizens of wealthy nations via their elected governments contribute to the perpetuation of global poverty and ill health. If Pogge's analysis is correct, we have a strict obligation of justice, grounded in the duty not to cause harm, to change our institutions and take concrete compensatory actions [22].

## Henry Shue on “basic rights”

Oxford University’s Henry Shue focusses on the role of human rights, especially economic rights, in international affairs. Discussions of human rights in the West have generally distinguished “civil and political” from “social, economic and cultural” rights and given priority to the former. Shue argues that the most fundamental core of the economic rights, which he calls “subsistence rights,” ought also to receive priority [23].

Shue maintains that there are basic rights to security and subsistence. His defence of subsistence as a basic right has three main components.

### 1. (1)

Some charge that the right to subsistence is a “positive right” and thus inherently of lower priority. According to a commonly held liberal view, positive rights entail correlative duties to act, whereas negative rights entail duties merely not to violate and not to interfere with other’s fundamental freedoms. For example, the (negative) right to physical security can be understood as a right held by all implying a universal injunction to refrain from threatening the physical integrity of others. On this view, negative rights represent obligations for which one has a right to compel performance and impose sanctions for non-performance. Positive rights are more indeterminate; moreover, failure to comply confers no legal sanction. Shue counters this charge noting that all rights are in fact *mixed* and require both negative and positive actions to secure their enjoyment. For instance, the right to physical security implies not only that all citizens within a state refrain from assaulting one another, but also that the government undertake substantive steps to sustain a coercive system of justice and a police force.



2. (2)

The right to physical integrity is often argued to have special priority in that no one can fully enjoy any right if her physical integrity is threatened. Shue makes a parallel case for subsistence rights. He argues that the rights to physical integrity and subsistence collectively provide the material preconditions necessary to the enjoyment of all other rights, such as the right to property, the right to equal political participation, and the right to freedom of association.

3. (3)

To complement the idea of basic rights, Shue offers a theory of related duties. Essentially, “basic rights are everyone’s minimum reasonable demands upon the rest of humanity”; they call for three kinds of duties incumbent upon individuals and societies. These are: 1) the duty to avoid depriving; 2) the duty to protect from deprivation; and 3) the duty to aid the deprived.

What does Shue’s thesis about “basic rights” imply about transnational duties towards health? His response is somewhat ambivalent and falls short of asserting universal duties towards all those deprived of their basic rights. A particularly important challenge comes from an interlocutor who accepts the notion of universal subsistence rights, but argues that responsibility for their fulfilment rests with the nation of the bearer of the duty [23]. For Shue, duties beyond borders figure principally as “a back-up arrangement for the failure of so-called national governments” and come into play “where the state with the primary duty to protect rights fails – for lack of will or lack of capacity – to fulfill its duty”. [23] In essence, to the extent that liberal democracies accept that basic rights are fundamental to domestic justice, Shue argues that a principle of consistency requires that they also respect and promote basic rights through foreign policy in countries where appropriate institutional provisions are absent or incomplete. Therefore, even if national boundaries legitimately delimit political communities

whose members share strong ties and obligations, states espousing liberal democratic values have a duty to adopt foreign policies consistent with basic rights.

The right to subsistence aims to guarantee every human being worldwide a decent chance at living a long and healthy life, and includes protection from extreme poverty and guarantees related to the social determinants of health, as well as elementary health care [23].

## John Rawls and the duty of assistance

Perhaps the most influential analyst of international responsibilities from a liberal perspective, the late Harvard philosopher John Rawls addressed the question of how reasonable citizens and peoples might live together peacefully in a just world. His work is animated by the belief that the greatest evils of human history—including war, persecution, starvation and poverty—are the consequence of *political* injustice, and the removal of such injustice the key to their resolution [32]. For Rawls, the fundamental subjects of international law are political societies or “peoples”, collective entities with specific concepts of right and justice whose territory is bounded by borders. The diversity of values and cultures among peoples is the result of legitimate free exercise of human reason, and tolerance requires that we refrain from imposition of a supposedly universal conception of human rights and liberal democracy at the international level.

Rawls’s description of a just international community is based on his description of justice at the national level [33]. Speaking of modern constitutional democracies, Rawls argues that a just state must structure economic opportunities and social conditions so as to guarantee “fair equality of opportunity” in terms of life chances of the members of different sectors of society. Within a framework of guaranteed rights and liberties, Rawls proposes that social and

economic inequalities be permitted only to the extent that they are of greatest benefit to the least advantaged. He argues that these principles of social cooperation reflect the notion of “reciprocity,” or what it would be reasonable for free and equal persons ignorant of their specific future roles to accept in an ideal form of social contract [33].

At the international level Rawls envisages a similar hypothetical social contract. The representatives of peoples come together in a context of reciprocity, characterised by symmetry, freedom and equality of the parties. In a situation that masks specific knowledge of features such as country size, wealth and history, Rawls claims that the representatives would define eight principles of mutual governance, including a duty to “assist other peoples living under unfavourable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime” [32].

### *The duty to aid burdened societies*

Rawls distinguishes duties and norms of conduct governing the relationship of “well-ordered peoples” (generally, liberal democracies) to two types of societies: “outlaw states” that refuse to comply with international law, and—the focus of our interest—“burdened societies.” Rawls defines burdened societies as those that suffer from unfavourable circumstances that preclude them from developing just *political* institutions. Moreover, he maintains that the key element in how a country fares overall is its own political culture and traditions, rather than poor luck in its share of natural resources or external factors related to interactions between states [32]. This thesis, known as “explanatory nationalism,” is highly contested. In keeping with this view, Rawls limits universally valid human rights to political rights.

Although his eight rules of governance do not include a principle of distributive justice, Rawls holds that well-ordered societies have an important duty to assist burdened societies. He offers three

points of guidance. First, mechanisms for assistance should be chosen so as to effect a change in the political culture and institutions of the burdened society. Rawls argues that economic transfers may not be most appropriate for realising this goal [32]. Among recommended courses of action, Rawls stresses the importance of policies and interventions that emphasise human rights, particularly those that further the rights and fundamental interests of women [32]. Second, while recognising that poverty and a lack of material resources may impact on a country's ability to develop and maintain positive political institutions, the aim of the duty of assistance is not to compensate for material lacks, to equalise levels of wealth across societies, or to permit continuous economic growth. Third, the objective of assistance is to enable burdened societies to achieve just political arrangements. When this is achieved further assistance is not required, even if the society remains relatively poor [32].

### *Health & the duty of assistance*

The aim of Rawls' duty of assistance is to enable burdened societies to achieve just political arrangements. As this duty is framed in political terms it entails no obvious health-related obligations. Candidate strategies must be justified by demonstrating their contribution to just political arrangements. We argue that supporters of a rawlsian position should privilege health-related interventions, as empirical evidence shows that interventions to improve global health make an essential contribution to achieving just political arrangements. We offer two complementary reasons.

### Unhealthy societies cannot be politically just

Rawls describes several criteria that must be satisfied in order for a society to be just. At the domestic level, a just society must satisfy

Rawls's principle of equality of opportunity [33]. Yet, there is extensive empirical evidence that health problems are disproportionately concentrated in disadvantaged population sub-groups, reflecting and exacerbating social and economic differences between the members of a society [34]. Everywhere the burden of disease is high, the chance to survive to adulthood, when the rights and privileges of democratic citizenship can be exercised, differs sharply across social groups. Deeply unhealthy societies therefore cannot guarantee that those with similar abilities, skills and initiative have similar life chances, regardless of starting point.

Out of respect for national sovereignty, Rawls offers a less stringent version of the equality of opportunity principle for state members of the just international community. The international version stipulates that all states must, at a minimum, maintain equality of opportunity in education and training [32]. However, child survival, school performance and life prospects are importantly affected by preventable and treatable health conditions, and negative effects are concentrated among vulnerable population sub-groups [3]. Where the burden of disease is high, the principle of equality of opportunity in education and training cannot be met.

Rawls also views basic economic entitlements as essential to just political arrangements [32]. A high burden of disease contributes to the entrenchment of poverty and threatens subsistence rights, with greatest impact upon the vulnerable and powerless [34, 35]. For this ensemble of reasons, societies with a high burden of disease necessarily fail to meet criteria for just political arrangements.

Health interventions are a particularly effective way to promote just political arrangements

Conversely, for many otherwise vibrantly democratic developing nations, failure to achieve a reasonable standard of population health is a major impediment to achieving just political arrangements. Where the burden of disease is still high,

improvements in population health would speed the process of transition to just societies by making it possible for individuals to enjoy real exercise of their rights, liberties and opportunities and to avoid destitution. Such policies would disproportionately promote the well-being and empowerment of women and children. Health interventions are also potentially very effective in stimulating sustainable economic growth and alleviating poverty [2].

## Discussion

The moral significance of national borders is perhaps the central question facing contemporary theories of justice. Noting that one's country of birth is a matter of moral luck, cosmopolitan philosophers [22, 24] argue that the deep inequalities that characterise our globe are injustices that ought to be corrected by the international community. Their nationalist counterparts [23, 32] argue that the concept of justice does not properly apply in the international context. These philosophers highlight the absence of legitimate institutions of common governance at the global level and the importance of preserving national autonomy.

We have reviewed four theories taking different positions in this debate and highlighted the reasons that each might give to support initiatives to improve the health of the worst off worldwide [Table 1]. The four theories offer distinct rationales for intervention and suggest different limits on responsibilities, with cosmopolitan theories (Singer, Pogge) generally upholding more widespread and urgent responsibilities for health beyond borders than their nationalist counterparts (Shue, Rawls), who seek to qualify the scope of such duties. Notwithstanding, some important commonalities emerge.

First, whether conceived as obligations of justice or charity, responsibilities to provide international assistance are significant for all four theories [Table 1]. Even those theorists who see national

borders as highly morally salient recognise the importance of some supranational obligations, in contradiction to the popular presumption that domestic concerns always have priority. In other words, there are limits to the scope of acceptable national autonomy.

Second, among the range of potential aid foci, interventions for health enjoy consistent prominence [Table 1. This reflects the inherent importance of health to individuals and its contribution to leading a dignified and fulfilling life [36], as well as the intimate link between health and development [2]. The importance of global health is explicit for Singer, Pogge and Shue, while for Rawls it follows from the effectiveness of health interventions in strengthening equality of opportunity and thereby, just political arrangements.

Third, despite significant theoretical disagreements [Tables 1, and 2, many of the most important current initiatives to promote global health can be supported by all four views [Table 3Additional file 2. An “overlapping consensus”[18] at the level of policy can thus be upheld from a variety of moral perspectives and by way of diverging views about the importance of national borders.

Our analysis has two important limitations. First, as this argument was developed through a review of the work of four contemporary philosophers, our conclusions reflect the frameworks selected for inclusion and the specific interpretations given these theories. Our selection of theories was careful and purposive, and we believe that they do represent the most important viewpoints in contemporary discussions of justice. Moreover, although limitations of space prevent us from undertaking a demonstration, we believe that the overwhelming majority of contemporary theories of justice could support a similar justification for action on global health. While we acknowledge the existence of viewpoints that might not support our conclusions, we wish to underscore the remarkable degree of support for current global health interventions among prominent competing frameworks.

Second, given the inherently controversial nature of ethical

choices, a separate challenge relates to the value of pursuing a normative approach. One might ask, would it not be preferable to base the argument on pragmatic reasons for action such as enlightened self-interest, or protection of common interests? Pragmatic reasons offer extremely important sources of motivation in many instances. However, our self-interest is not always served by doing what is right. The current global situation has clear winners and losers. To the extent that the contemporary state of global health reflects “a toxic combination of poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics” [37], the remedy cannot come from the powerless.

The MDGs represent a landmark pledge of solidarity on the part of the international community towards the global poor. As the target date for their fulfilment approaches, recent crises related to instability in financial markets and in food and commodity prices, as well as environmental change, threaten to undermine hard-won gains in health and prosperity while jeopardising future availability of overseas development assistance (ODA). ODA is only one of many policy channels affecting global health and development [38]; however, it plays a crucial role [8, 37]. Choices made by the citizens and governments of the wealthy nations in the next short while will be particularly decisive. The overlapping normative consensus we have identified in favour of action on global health is undoubtedly fragile; yet, it resonates with the broad based public support enjoyed by key global health initiatives. We are hopeful that an informed dialogue on ethics can enable individuals and governments to find a more reasoned basis for their views. The most effective resource of the global poor may be a transformation of moral vision on the part of the powerful [22].



# Abbreviations

**AIDS:**

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

**DAH:**

International Development Assistance for Health

**G8:**

Group of Eight Countries

**HIV:**

Human Immunodeficiency Virus

**MDGs:**

Millennium Development Goals

**ODA:**

Overseas Development Assistance

**TRIPS:**

Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights

**WTO:**

World Trade Organization.

# 56. Ethics of Emerging Information

## Ethics of Emerging Information and Communication Technologies: On the implementation of responsible research and innovation

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### Abstract

Research and innovation in emerging technologies can have great benefits but also raise ethical and social concerns. The current discourse on Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) is a novel attempt to come to conceptual and practical ways of dealing with such concerns. In order to effectively understand and address possible ethical and social issues, stakeholders need to have an understanding of what such issues might be. This article explores

ethical issues related to the field of emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs). Based on a foresight study of ICT that led to the identification of eleven emerging technologies, we outline the field of ethical and social issues of these technologies. This overview of possible problems can serve as an important sensitising device to these issues. We describe how such awareness can contribute to the successful deployment of responsible practice in research and innovation.

emerging ICT, responsible research and innovation, ethics

Issue Section:

## [MAIN ARTICLES](#)

### **1. Introduction**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) generate 25 per cent of total business expenditure in research and innovation (R&I) in Europe (European Commission 2014). In addition, investments in ICTs account for 50 per cent of all European productivity growth. Recognising their importance, in the Horizon 2020 programme the European Union reserved 16 billion Euros for research on ICTs. In addition to this public investment, there is significant private funding for R&I. The scope of this expenditure and the social consequences put forth that innovations are likely to have rendered it desirable to have mechanisms that would allow an early identification of social and ethical consequences of emerging ICTs (Wright and Friedewald 2013).

This reasoning is expressed in current policy on Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) on both European and national levels. RRI is a pillar of the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation–Horizon 2020 (European Commission 2013) and national funding bodies including those of Norway, the UK, and the Netherlands have initiated programmes to include RRI into funded

R&I projects ([Sutcliffe 2011](#)). It is a cornerstone of current research and science policy ([Anichini and de Cheveigné 2012](#); [Cagnin et al. 2012](#); [Mejlgaard and Bloch 2012](#); [Owen et al. 2012](#)). RRI aims to achieve acceptable and societally desirable outcomes of R&I activities ([Von Schomberg 2012](#)). R&I thus becomes a key factor as an enabler of smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth as is aimed for by the European 2020 strategy ([European Commission 2010](#)).

Owen et al. suggest that, for R&I to be responsible, it needs to anticipate, reflect, deliberate, and be responsive (2012; [Stilgoe et al., 2013](#)). These four aspects of RRI were developed into the AREA framework for RRI that was adopted by the UK Engineering and Physical Research Council ([Owen 2014](#)). In this framework, the main concepts to apply to ensure RRI are anticipation, reflection, engagement, and action. In this article, we return to the AREA framework in the discussion of the application of the set of ethical issues of emerging technologies as a way of realising RRI.

RRI raises considerable normative and epistemic challenges. On the one hand, it has to establish what is considered a socially desirable and acceptable direction. An important part of this process is reflecting on possible ethical and social issues R&I give rise to ([Grunwald 2011](#); [Jacob et al. 2013](#)). Only with a clear understanding of the social and ethical issues can these be proactively addressed, that is, be anticipated, reflected upon, deliberated with the public and other stakeholders, and be responded to.

On the other hand, steering R&I into a desirable direction requires knowledge about their possible impacts ([Von Schomberg 2012](#); [Weber et al. 2012](#)). Moreover, as [Collingridge \(1980\)](#) famously has shown, this understanding should be gained as early as possible because innovations over time tend to become 'locked-in' to society making it harder and too costly to control them ([Asante et al. 2014](#); [Liebert and Schmidt 2010](#)).

One key problem that RRI theory and practice face is that proactive governance of research and technology development runs into the problem of the uncertainty of the future. This is partly

based on the fundamental characteristic of the future, which is unknown. It is exacerbated by the complexity of current R&I systems that rarely include linear causal chains and defy simple predictions. These fundamental problems of R&I governance are further exacerbated by the nature of ICT which has long been recognised as logically malleable ([Moor 1985](#)), that is, open to a virtually infinite range of unintended consequences or uses. This idea has been captured in the debate on interpretive (or interpretative) flexibility ([Cadili and Whitley 2005](#)). The idea behind this concept is that the characteristics of a technology are not fixed in the technology itself but are subject to the social processes of interpreting and using the technology within a particular context. While one can argue that all technologies are subject to interpretive flexibility ([Doherty et al. 2006](#)), this is even more true for ICTs whose nature allows them to develop over time and through use. However, despite these fundamental problems of predicting intended and unintended uses of ICTs and thus comprehending their social consequences, some guidance is required to allow stakeholders in ICT R&I to engage with the question of which technologies are desirable and which innovation pathways should or should not be pursued.

This article contributes to meeting this challenge by providing decision makers and researchers with a way of sensitising stakeholders involved in RRI in ICT to possible ethical issues. This increased sensitivity can then be translated into appropriate research policies, programmes, or projects. Drawing on an extensive analysis of emerging ICTs it is found that not only is it hard to establish clear boundaries between ICTs, but that similar types of issues tend to reappear across different ICTs. As a result, higher level themes across issues are established that serve as a basis for a heuristic that supports stakeholders of ICT R&I in substantiating their RRI activities.

This is necessary to successfully integrate principles of RRI into R&I processes. Our article is based on the understanding that all knowledge of the future is fallible. It is based on a rigorous

methodology that does not guarantee knowledge of the future but a transparent basis of the discussion of possible futures, as required by proactive R&I practices and policies. The audience for this article, therefore, includes all stakeholders who are involved in R&I in ICT. This starts from individual researchers who work on such projects and who are involved in project governance to research institutions undertaking such research and goes all the way to national and international research funders and policymakers.

In order to make this argument and provide the evidence to support it, the article begins by clarifying its concepts and methodology. These include the concept of emerging technologies and principles of investigating the ethical consequences. The article then argues that it is possible to distil a number of general ethical issues that apply to a range of emerging ICT technologies, and provides an overview of these issues and a set of interrogative questions which innovators and researchers can use to guide their reflection on each ethical issue. The article concludes by discussing the application of these ideas and their relevance to research practice and policy.

## 2. Concepts and methodology

This article aims to facilitate RRI in emerging ICTs in a way that goes beyond individual artefacts or application examples by identifying ethical issues at the convergence of ICTs. This broader view is based upon a detailed understanding of individual technologies. It is therefore important to briefly describe how we arrived at the ICTs considered to be emerging, and, in more depth, insights into ethical and social consequences of these emerging ICTs.

This section starts by clarifying our understanding of emerging ICTs and explaining how a transection of emerging ICTs representative for the field as a whole was established. Next, it discusses what counts as an ethical issue in this context, and how

ethical issues were identified for the emerging ICTs. Finally, the section discusses what cross-cutting themes emerged from categorising these issues.

## 2.1 Emerging information and communication technologies

The term ‘emerging technology’ is linked to the idea of a life cycle of a technology. Kendall (1997) suggests that the life cycle of technology can be described in five consecutive phases of technological advancement that are somewhat overlapping:

1. technological invention or discovery;
2. technological emergence;
3. technological acceptance;
4. technological sublime (in which its value is fully appreciated);
5. technological surplus.

In the second or emergence phase, technologies have been discovered or invented a while ago. Although they are known by researchers, decision makers and end users are not yet fully aware of the details, potential, and uses of these technologies, hence the term ‘emergence’ (Kendall 1997). Only in the ‘sublime’ phase is a technology fully understood, appreciated, and put to its best uses. Emerging technologies can thus be defined as those currently being developed and holding a realistic potential to not only become reality, but to become socially and economically relevant within the foreseeable future. Instances of emerging technologies include biotechnologies, ICTs, and nanotechnologies. For current purposes, ‘foreseeable future’ is equated to a time frame of 10–15 years. The limited period of 10–15 years is justified because established foresight methodologies allow for claims using this horizon (Brey 2012a). Furthermore, the temporal limitation is due to the fact that

technology development and funding programmes have a comparable time frame (Stahl and Rogerson 2009).

This article concentrates specifically on emerging ICTs. While most of us will be familiar with ICTs and their numerous applications, it is difficult to define the concept of ICT. Computers as information processing machines used to be large, easily identifiable machines. This is no longer the case, as aspects of information processing now pervade most other technologies from household support, such as washing machines and dishwashers, to cars and whole buildings. Communication technology has followed a similar path and is now pervasive and integrated in all sorts of other artefacts. In order to understand the social and ethical consequences of ICT, a broad and inclusive definition needs to be chosen. We therefore define ICTs as those large-scale socio-technical systems that make use of computer, network, and other information technology to significantly affect the way humans interact with the world.

ICTs raise fundamental challenges that render them particularly problematic from the perspective of responsible innovation. We have already alluded to their inherent flexibility which Moor (1985: 269) called their 'logical malleability'. Logical malleability is a key enabler of convergence with other technologies because it allows for an integration of ICT in other technologies. In addition, ICTs are ubiquitous (Quilici-Gonzalez et al. 2010). The increasingly pervasive nature of technologies means that demarcating clear boundaries between systems, features, and functionality becomes increasingly problematic. Also, due to speed of innovation and diffusion of ICTs, anticipating consequences for society becomes hard. The problem of the 'many hands' (Johnson 2001; Johnson and Powers 2008) makes it difficult for drawing a clear line between individual actions and eventual consequences. It is further exacerbated, as ICTs are increasingly interlinked and highly complex, making attribution of discrete features and functionality to individual researchers, developers, or strategists conceptually and empirically impossible.

The emerging ICTs used for determining the ethical issues in



this article were identified through a structured literature analysis which explored publications from two main sources: policy- and funding-oriented publications on the one hand and research-oriented publications on the other hand (see Appendix 1). The rationale was that policymakers and funders have a vision of what they would like to achieve and that they can mobilise resources to achieve this. Researchers, on the other hand, have a clearer understanding of what can be achieved and how this may fit with policy vision. Taken together, publications from these two types of sources offer a plausible vision of where emerging ICTs are heading to.

The process of identifying emerging ICTs was complex and led to a large number of possible technologies, artefacts, and applications. In order to keep this manageable, we condensed the various visions to a list of eleven candidates for the status of being an emerging technology that are listed below in alphabetic order:

- Affective Computing
- Ambient Intelligence
- Artificial Intelligence
- Bioelectronics
- Cloud Computing
- Future Internet
- Human-machine symbiosis
- Neuroelectronics
- Quantum Computing
- Robotics
- Virtual / Augmented Reality

It is important to be clear on the epistemic status of this list. The list represents a condensed version of ICTs that are currently discussed as being likely to have significant impact in 10–15 years' time. This explains that it contains some technologies that have long been established such as Robotics or Artificial Intelligence. These technologies are described in the literature as currently undergoing

major developments that will dramatically increase their social impact. We do not claim that this is correct or that this list is exhaustive. Rather, the point of identifying these emerging ICTs is to have a basis for identification of possible social and ethical issues they are likely to raise. Moreover, rather than being comprehensive, the eleven ICTs listed were chosen because they are representative for the range of different strands of ICTs currently around. By covering these strands, it is ensured that their distinct characteristics are being included in the ethical analysis.

## 2.2 Ethics of emerging technologies

In this article, we explore the ethics of emerging technologies with a view to providing decision makers with insights that allow them to steer R&I in directions permitting them to proactively engage with likely ethical issues. Having outlined what constitutes an emerging technology, more specifically an emerging ICT, and which eleven emerging ICTs are being identified, we now need to explain what counts as an ethical issue in this context.

This discussion needs to acknowledge the very broad range and long history of philosophical ethics. This short article cannot possibly do justice to it. Moreover, we believe that a detailed philosophical account of ethics would be of limited value for this article. What we are interested in are likely consequences of the introduction or use of ICTs that would affect individuals' or collectives' rights or obligations, that people would object to and see as problematic, unjust, or difficult to justify. Following [Stahl's \(2012\)](#) categorisation of ethics, these are issues that relate to moral intuition or explicit morality. This means that they are related to what people feel to be right or wrong or that they would explicitly argue to be right or wrong. Such intuitions or moral convictions may be subject to a broad range of philosophical ethical justifications and reflections. This delineation of ethical issues implies a broad

and pluralistic approach to ethics which includes a number of social issues. It does not require the adoption of a particular philosophical position, such as deontology, teleology, or virtue ethics. The purpose of our work is to identify possible ethical issues. Addressing them may need more detailed philosophical analysis, but this is a step beyond the remit of the current article.

This brings us back to the question of what constitutes substantive ethical issues and how we can know about ethical issues related to emerging ICTs. Attempting to answer these questions leads to numerous epistemological and other questions. In addition to the uncertainty of the description of the technology (Ihde 1999) there are problems concerning the choice of ethical position and the likely change in moral preferences that may affect users' perceptions and their ethical evaluations. The speed and impact of technology research and development have exacerbated this problem leading to calls for a better ethics which has been answered from various perspectives (Brey 2012b; Sollie and Düwell 2009).

The identification of ethical issues was undertaken through a systematic exploration of the extant literature on emerging ICTs and ethics of ICTs of the last decade (see Appendix 2). The analysis took a pluralist and descriptive stance as outlined above that allowed a number of different voices to be heard. This plurality, while running the risk of inconsistency, had the advantage of covering a broad range of issues and views and offering different interpretations. We accepted the various authors' views on what constitutes an ethical issue. In the last stage, the soundness and completeness of the ethical analyses were established by comparing the findings of the ethical analysis to the outcome of a bibliometric analysis of current literature on ICT ethics (Heersmink et al. 2010, 2011). In addition, the soundness of the arguments and considerations, and the completeness of the analysis were ensured by an external peer review process involving ethicists and other experts (Rader et al. 2011).

We developed a detailed description of likely ethical issues for each of the eleven technologies (Heersmink et al. 2010; Stahl 2011).

One example of a set of ethical issues that came out of this methodology is in the field of affective computing. The ethical issues that were found can be seen in [Fig. 1](#).

Figure 1

Example: ethical issues in Affective Computing.

[View largeDownload slide](#)

Example: ethical issues in Affective Computing.

The figure shows the names of the ethical issues as represented by a mind mapping software (MindManager). Each of the items listed is linked to the full text (the notebook and pen icon) and could therefore easily be accessed. The advantage of using the mind mapping tool was that it allowed for an easy comparison and rearrangement of ethical issues across different technologies. This is what we did in the subsequent step. The ethical issues of each of the eleven technologies were cross-referenced against the other emerging technologies to produce overviews of the issues. In many cases it turned out that the same issues were found in multiple technologies, such as Privacy, in [Fig. 2](#) (the acronyms match up to the list of emerging technologies above, e.g. AC = Affective Computing; AmI = Ambient Intelligence).

Figure 2

Example: privacy across multiple emerging technologies.

[View largeDownload slide](#)

Example: privacy across multiple emerging technologies.

However, although privacy issues were found in most of the identified technologies, the nature of those privacy issues could be quite different in different technologies. By looking at the full description of privacy in each technology we could identify overlapping concerns as well as differences.

By rearranging the different ethical issues we could identify

numerous issues that were raised across several technologies. The original identification of the ethical issues on the level of individual technologies is described in detail in [Heersmink et al. \(2010\)](#). The overall number of ethical issues across all of the technologies was around fifty. This number was too large to allow individual readers to engage with in depth. We therefore decided to reduce the number by categorising the issues and then focusing on the higher level categories. This was done in discussion between the authors, following an interpretive approach ([Butler 1998](#); [Walsham 2006](#)), that is based on our understanding of the ethical issues. The categories we used to structure the ethical issues (see list below) are consonant with ethical literature (e.g. concerning the relevance of knowledge or consequences). When discussing the findings with colleagues we found them to be intuitively accessible. We realise, however, that the categories are not exclusive, that is, other ways of categorising the issues are possible. This is the list of categories we developed and that form the basis of the subsequent discussion:

1. Conceptual issues and ethical theories
2. Impact on individuals
3. Social consequences
4. Uncertainty of outcomes
5. Perceptions of technology
6. Role of humans

These themes allowed us to understand the context of cross-technological issues that reflect the need for RRI activities in R&I ICT. A number of the ethical issues could conceivably have fit in more than one theme. In order to evaluate our work it is important to keep in mind that the point of this exercise was to come to a broader view of shared ethical issues raised across different individual emerging ICTs to help stakeholders in the ICT development process such as researchers or policymakers to become sensitive to issues they are likely to face. We believe that the way in which we categorised the issues is intuitive and plausible.

This does not mean that there could not be other ways of classifying ethical issues that could achieve similar purposes.

### 3. Ethical issues of emerging technologies

As indicated earlier, we see this article's role as a mechanism to be used to sensitise stakeholders involved in RRI in ICT to possible ethical issues. This increased sensitivity can then be translated into appropriate research policies, programmes, or projects. The idea is that the following section will offer insights and maybe even inspirations that link the general ethical issues of emerging ICTs that we discuss here to the concrete technologies that these policymakers, decision makers, or researchers actually deal with.

We have already pointed out that different issues can have different meanings for different technologies or in different application scenarios. However, there are many similarities and there is important overlap between the technologies. This section therefore offers a brief outline of the main themes and some of the key sub-themes. It lists ethical issues that have been identified as relevant across several emerging ICTs and that these are therefore worth considering when developing new technologies, even if these do not clearly fit into any one of the main technologies listed earlier.

In addition to the introduction of the various ethical issues, we propose some guiding questions that will allow readers to reflect on the relevance of the issues for their individual activities. These guiding questions take their point of departure from the ethical issues and aim to stimulate the reader to explore how these issues could be relevant in the context of the specific research they are concerned with. The guiding questions were developed by the three authors by going back to the source of the ethical issues described in detail for each technology in [Heersmink et al. \(2010\)](#). The method of developing included a discussion of the ethical issues as described in the context of the individual technologies with the

aim of eliciting important facets that the general description of the technology might gloss over. Several candidates for such questions were then discussed and a small number of these candidates were retained in the descriptions provided below. These questions thus have the status of a heuristic that will allow readers to better understand the issues and to prompt them to think in different ways about them.

The following discussion is an extremely condensed summary of a large body of literature. In order to render it legible we have refrained from referencing individual ideas and arguments. Readers interested in the provenance of the ideas are referred to the original ethical analysis of the individual technologies which is available in Heersmink et al. (2010).

### 3.1 Conceptual issues and ethical theories

One recurring key issue is the question of the conceptual clarity surrounding emerging technology. Lack of conceptual clarity becomes relevant in cases where the vision of the technology is not well developed.

Most of the technologies listed above involve scientifically- or philosophically-contested terminology. Affective computing, for example, is based on the idea that affects and emotions can be measured and processed computationally. In addition to the technical challenges this may cause, it furthermore involves questions pertaining to the definition, recognition, and measurement of emotions. Disciplines that have been involved in such work, including psychology or sociology, do not have universally-accepted answers to such questions.

The concept of autonomy, as already indicated, raises deep philosophical questions. It relates to issues of freedom of will and freedom of action. The same concept of autonomy can be used to

describe humans and machines, even though it is likely that human and machine autonomy refer to fundamentally different concepts.

A final problem is that of the meaning of ethics. In this study, the ethical analysis used a purely descriptive stance, which left the question open as to what constitutes a moral issue or how it would be evaluated from an ethical perspective. For the development of a broad understanding this is acceptable, but it means that conceptual questions such as whether it is possible for non-human entities to have moral or other responsibilities remain open. As a result, the overview provided here may in some cases involve equivocations. However, this is acceptable as awareness raising will need to be complemented with a specific ethics review within a given research or development context.

A researcher or policymaker aiming to understand how this set of issues may affect their work can try to answer the following guiding questions.

**Guiding Questions:**

- Are concepts and terminology regarding the technology already established? How much disagreement exists concerning the scope of the technology?
- Does current research concerning the technology cross academic discipline boundaries? If so, are there problematic definitions of terms and concepts across these boundaries?
- Do ethical questions concerning the technology imply a particular ethical position?

## 3.2 Impact on individuals

Under the theme of ‘impact on individuals’ we collected issues that have predictable consequences for individual human beings, their rights, and their well-being. Many of these issues are already well



discussed in the literature and in some cases have led to significant legislative activities.

### *3.2.1 Privacy*

Privacy is probably the most widely discussed ethical issue in ICT and has been highlighted as a key concern for RRI ([Preissl 2011](#)). The emerging technologies that were investigated generally were perceived to exacerbate privacy issues or even create novel ones. This could happen due to the increasing amount of data that most of the ubiquitous and pervasive systems (e.g. ambient intelligence, neurocomputing, robotics, virtual/augmented reality, etc.) could create and collect. In addition, emerging technologies are likely to offer new ways of storing, processing, and interpreting this data deluge. And finally, one can expect novel types of data to come into existence that may raise equally novel privacy issues. A good example of this is affective computing, which holds the promise of harvesting data on emotional states, which may have consequences that are currently not been fully understood. Privacy has recently been shown to be the by far most discussed ethical issue in ICT ([Stahl et al. 2016](#)). It is therefore no surprise that it figures prominently in the expected ethical issues linked to emerging ICTs. However, privacy is by no means the only predictable issue that is expected to arise as a consequence of the use of emerging technologies.

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Which types and quantities of data will the technology require and/or generate?
- Who will have access to the data?
- Who will know about the existence and possible inferences from the data?

### 3.2.2 *Autonomy*

Personal autonomy can be affected by emerging technologies. On the one hand, many technologies that were investigated are said to contribute to increasing human self-control. Technologies make people more aware of themselves and their environment and give them more control over their environment. Ambient intelligence, for instance, makes one's environment more responsive to a person's needs and intentions ultimately allowing personalised interaction and information. Also, technology may enhance our capacities such as our cognitive and motor abilities, increasing our control over our life.

At the same time, the same technologies that enhance our autonomy may also decrease it. Emerging technologies enable monitoring and controlling of people's behaviours, attitudes, emotions, thoughts, moods, and actions, etc. People may delegate tasks and decisions to ('smart') applications of these technologies. These developments constitute a shift of control from individuals towards technology. In parallel there is a growing dependence on these technologies to perform certain tasks. The sheer possibilities offered by emerging ICTs in combination with governmental paternalism, social and market pressure may compel people to make use of these technologies. Finally, enhanced autonomy could entail a raised sense of responsibility as well.

Although enhancement and infringement of autonomy are attributed to almost any technological advancement in history, the refinement, ubiquity, and level of agency displayed by current emerging ICTs can be said to raise the potential impact on autonomy to a new, much higher level.

#### **Guiding questions:**

- In what ways does the technology improve independence/autonomy?
- To what extent does the technology monitor or control people's behaviour, attitude, emotions, thoughts, moods, and

actions?

- Does the technology make decisions? What are these decisions based on, and do they take into account ethical issues?

### *3.2.3 Treatment of humans*

By enabling more refined and life-like interaction with, collection, and use of detailed and specific personal data, emerging ICTs enable the creation of persuasive and coercive systems able to manipulate individuals into performing certain unwanted or involuntary behaviour. What's more, some technologies can lead to addiction of its users or provide ways to escape from 'real life'. Related to this issue is the question of whether individuals are offered the opportunity to give their informed consent when engaging in human machine/system interaction, particularly vulnerable people including children and the elderly. Another issue along these lines is whether different rules apply for treating humans in ICT-enabled interactions, for instance, do events in a virtual environment have the same moral status as their 'real life' counterparts?

#### **Guiding questions:**

- In what ways could the technology impact on the daily life of people?
- Could vulnerable people be particularly affected by this technology?
- Does the technology seek informed consent where necessary?
- Could events that happen within the virtual world of the technology negatively impact on the real world?

### *3.2.4 Identity*

Key ethical questions refer to personal identity. By enabling

individuals to improve their capacities and life in general, emerging technologies may cause individuals to be more self-centred. By taking on and enhancing traditionally human functions, emerging technologies may alter our view on what it means to be a human or individual. This includes conceptions of authenticity, human dignity, normality, and the idea of what makes someone healthy.

**Guiding questions:**

- Does the technology change human capabilities, e.g. their ability to perform certain tasks?
- How will the technology affect the way in which users see themselves or one another?

### *3.2.5 Security*

Finally, the value of security is highlighted in multiple ethical analyses of emerging technologies. Although ICTs are important contributors to security, for instance by enabling advanced surveillance, some general drawbacks are also put forward in the ethical analyses. For one, ICTs such as the Future Internet exhibit all kinds of (new) vulnerabilities that attract criminals who try to take advantage of these vulnerabilities. Also applications of ICTs pose a risk to humans as they may damage the bodily and mental integrity of a person. Furthermore, technologies are said to distance individuals from the 'real world', blurring their perception of real life risks – which makes effective handling of these risks more difficult.

**Guiding questions:**

- Is the technology likely to create novel types of vulnerabilities, e.g. by generating or requiring sensitive data?
- To what degree will existing security solutions be applicable to the technology?

### 3.3 Consequences for society

The previous sections referred to ethical issues that predominantly affect the individual who uses or is affected by the technology. In addition to such individual consequences, most of the emerging ICTs studied entailed consequences for groups or society as a whole.

#### 3.3.1 *Digital divides*

The very nature of society is increasingly affected by novel ICTs. A widely shared concern voiced with regards to numerous of the technologies refers to fairness and equity. These considerations are often framed in terms of the so-called ‘digital divide’ between those who have access to technologies and those who do not. This (or these multiple) divide(s) may result in or increase inequality within and/or between societies (e.g. rich and poor countries). This, in turn, may cause stratification of groups according to their access to technology and undermine communication. While some individuals and groups will be able to better communicate with one another, different availability of technologies and diverging abilities to use them may erect barriers to communication in some cases. Another related consequence is the possible stigmatisation of those without access as they fall behind and are not able to live up to the standards set by technological innovation.

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Which impact will the technology have on the possibility to participate in social life?
- Which mechanisms of diffusion are likely to be used to introduce the technology widely?
- What are the likely consequences for groups that are already marginalised?

### *3.3.2 Collective human identity and the good life*

Another issue commonly referred to in the ethical discussion of emerging ICTs is the effect of technology on human culture and related notions, in particular with regards to the question of what leading a good life should entail. As ICTs impact our current way of life and alter the conditions for human interaction, uncertainty arises as to what preferences technology should fulfil and to what extent technology alters these preferences. Likewise the way humans view themselves and relate to others can be affected by technology.

The role of humans in society can be altered considerably as emerging ICTs enable replacement of humans by artefacts. Not only will tasks originally performed by humans be taken over by (intelligent) machines, it has also been argued that systems will be able to use humans as sub-personal information processors lacking human features such as intentional and conscious thinking in performing their tasks. These issues raise questions about what it is to be human, and how humans view themselves within a technologically enhanced society.

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Does the technology replace established human activities or work?
- Which view of culture or human society is the technology likely to promote?

### *3.3.3 Ownership, data control, and intellectual property*

ICT innovations make it difficult to ascertain who owns or controls data, software, and intellectual property, and how to guarantee that ownership is respected and protected. Although new models are being developed to deal with these issues, such as the Creative

Commons (<http://creativecommons.org/>), it remains difficult to evaluate the effectiveness and applicability of these models. Another concern in this respect is the risk of 'lock in', that is, dependence on a proprietary standard or third-party control over property or access to certain technology. These shifts in control are paralleled by shifts in power relations. Having control over data (such as for Cloud Computing), identities (such as online profiles), and, potentially, thoughts (such as with neuromarketing), ultimately raises questions about the status and desirability of the power that this control entails.

**Guiding questions:**

Which ownership or access models are favoured by the technology?

Does the technology make use of open or proprietary standards?

### *3.3.4 Responsibility.*

Issues are raised in the analyses concerning responsibility. Complexity of ICT systems makes it difficult to ascertain who is responsible for the consequences of the system, that is, the 'problem of many hands' (van de Poel et al. 2012). Additionally, as technology becomes more autonomous through 'smart systems', for example, a 'responsibility gap' can occur, making it difficult to allocate ultimate responsibility. This shift of control from humans to artefacts may also entail blaming technology for unwanted outcomes thereby exculpating humans involved.

Often responsibility issues transgress into the legal realm as well, as they question human legal liability and accountability. What's more, blurring of boundaries between organisations, termed 'de-perimeterisation', further exacerbates these concerns. On the other hand, emerging ICTs can also provide improved and new methods and sources of data to support establishing liability, for example, by enabling tracking of people more accurately.

**Guiding questions:**

- Which existing and legacy system does the technology rely on?
- Who is responsible for testing of the system?
- Which consequences could a malfunction or misuse of the technology have?

### *3.3.5 Surveillance*

Tracking and tracing of persons is fundamental to the societal theme of surveillance. Emerging ICTs are discussed as crucial enablers of the surveillance society, a panoptic society in which individuals are monitored around the clock. ICTs not only enable ubiquitous monitoring but can, on a far more fine-grained level, ultimately tap into the human brain itself (such as with gaze-tracking and neuroelectronic systems).

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Will the data that the technology generates allow for surveillance?
- How are access rights embedded in the technology?

### *3.3.6 Cultural differences*

Applications of emerging ICTs function on a global scale, across national and cultural borders. This raises concerns about dealing with and respecting cultural differences and doing justice to and cultivating cultural diversity. Conceptions and valuations of privacy, for instance, vary significantly across cultures, making it difficult to establish unified policies protecting privacy.

#### **Guiding questions:**

- Which assumptions about normal and desirable behaviour are embedded in the technology?
- Is there a possibility of testing the technology in different



cultures?

### 3.4 Uncertainty of outcomes

The majority of the emerging ICTs analysed display a level of uncertainty concerning outcomes and consequences they may entail. Technologies such as neuroelectronics or affective computing that enable monitoring or other forms of collecting and processing data involve hazards resulting from measurement and interpretation errors. Also, serious safety risks have been implicated for most emerging ICTs that may arise due to technological unknowns, malfunctioning, malicious intentions, and not fully-understood behaviours. In some instances, risks stem from technological challenges that are known but still need to be addressed. Finally, uncertainty can arise due to ‘function creep’, when data collected or technology designed for a specific purpose may, over time, become used for other (originally unanticipated and/or unwanted) purposes.

**Guiding questions:**

- What are the possible uses of the technology beyond the ones primarily envisaged?
- Are there foreseeable side effects or unintended consequences of the technology?

### 3.5 Perceptions of technology

The theme ‘Perceptions of Technology’ encompasses three types of issues that came to the forefront in the ethical analysis of individual technologies.

First, emerging ICTs make it increasingly possible for artefacts

to display anthropomorphic behaviour, particularly in robotics and artificial intelligence. Concerns have been raised about anthropomorphism misleading users, leading to a breach of trust, or sceptical attitudes of users towards the technology. This may also lead to the desensitising of people towards real individuals and creating attachment of individuals to artefacts.

Secondly, questions arise as to whether or to what extent machines can attain agency and should be considered autonomous. This question gives rise to concerns about the moral worth of machines, whether machines can be held responsible, if they should have rights, and what machine ethics should look like.

Thirdly, issues are brought forward stemming from the human-machine relationship. Concerns have been raised about machines replacing humans, machines taking over mankind, and change of social dynamics amongst people when interaction is mediated by technology. Also, different kinds of safety risks are implicated in the analyses of emerging ICTs, resulting from human interaction with technology.

**Guiding questions:**

- Will the technology appear autonomous to users?
- Will the technology be anthropomorphic, that is, look or act in ways that we normally expect humans to look or behave?
- Which human activities will be replaced by the technology?

## 3.6 Role of humans

This theme refers to the way in which novel ICTs change the way in which we see ourselves individually and collectively and the way we can interact. These concerns were partly raised in the themes of social consequences and impact on individuals. However, they represent a core concern that fundamentally differs from ethical concerns of other technologies or of ICTs in the past. We therefore

included this as a top-level theme to highlight its importance and the need for ways of dealing with it.

The role of humans can be affected by emerging ICTs in a number of different ways. We have already referred to the question of what counts as normal and how novel ICTs can change this. Technologies that are directly linked to humans or possibly even embedded in the body raise the question of drawing the line between humans and non-human artefacts and the very question of what counts as human. Such technologies can give new input into ancient philosophical debates about the relationship between mind and body, the nature of consciousness etc. These debates have significant implications for the definition of human dignity and the way it can be safeguarded.

In addition to such fundamental philosophical questions, there are a number of practical and applied issues that are likely to arise. One of these is the problem of replacement of humans where work and other activities are taken over by machines. This can have positive as well as negative consequences for humans' quality of life. A related issue could arise from the instrumental use of humans as part of larger human-machine assemblages.

**Guiding questions:**

- Which novel capabilities will the technology provide users with?
- Will the technology be closely linked to the user (e.g. be wearable) or implanted?
- Is the technology likely to replace established human activities or work?

### 3.7 Summary: Ethical issues of emerging ICTs

This section contains a highly-condensed summary of the ethical issues related to the set of eleven emerging ICTs that we identified

as likely to be socially and economically relevant in the medium-term future. By moving beyond the ethical analysis of individual technology and recategorising all the various ethical aspects in a more generic way, we have developed a set of ethical issues that are relevant across individual technologies and applications.

The value of this work is that it provides a sensitising mechanism relevant to all ICT research and is of potential interest to all stakeholders who are involved in it. To avoid misunderstandings we reiterate the fact that this is not a comprehensive discussion, as future issues may arise that nobody has thought of yet. We also concede that there may be alternative ways of compiling and expressing the same issues. More importantly, this list is simply an enumeration of ethical issues that neglects the depth of possible discussion in terms of theoretical perspectives, resulting obligations and responsibilities, underlying values or possible tensions between ethical issues. This discussion should thus not be seen as a checklist that one can work through and be sure to have addressed all ethical issues. However, we do believe that it represents a valuable starting point for the reflection of the ethics of emerging ICTs. The guiding questions we have provided for the individual ethical issues similarly do not claim to comprehensively cover all angles of the various issues, but they allow users to look specifically at the project or technology they are engaged in and to explore likely issues worth considering. We describe the implications that this overview of issues may have in the next section.

## 4. Application of RRI to emerging ICTs

An effective development of ethical awareness requires an understanding of possible ethical issues which then need to be worked through and analysed in detail in practical applications. When looking at the AREA framework for RRI (AREA: Anticipate,

Reflect, Engage, Act, see ([Owen 2014](#))), one can see several points where the awareness of ethical issues is important.

The above discussion of ethics of emerging ICTs clearly fits into the 'Anticipation' component of RRI. Large projects or programmes may have the opportunity to develop their own foresight activities. However, in most cases there will be limited resources for such activities. The ethical issues introduced earlier can therefore serve as a proxy of explicit foresight. They give an indication of likely ethical issues across technologies. The guiding questions can help the stakeholder involved to identify the specific issues that the particular technology in their area of interest may raise. The subsequent steps, Reflection, Engagement, and Action, all rely on an awareness of likely future issues.

With regards to our list of ethical issues, these are the steps where general ethical concepts need to be filled with life. As indicated earlier, the list of ethical issues we derived provides no context-related insights. It is not clear what privacy or autonomy would mean in a particular context or why they would constitute ethical issues. This means that at the point of reflection it is important to go beyond the headline issues we have listed and clarify on what grounds these are ethical issues, or which duties and responsibilities could derive from such a clarification. Further activities contributing to RRI, notably public engagement will also rely on material insights into likely ethical issues. The literature on public engagement and its many forms and methodologies is very rich and beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that most, if not all engagement activities need to incorporate an understanding of possible and likely ethical and social issues ([Andersen and Jaeger 1999](#); [Joss 1999](#); [Rask et al. 2012](#)).

To provide a practical example of how the insights produced here might be put into practice, let us look at the case of a company developing a telehealth application for a particular population, such as patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Such a technology could include the monitoring of vital signs via linked devices, a centralised database used to track disease progress

and trigger alerts, and a training section that allows patients to better monitor and manage their condition. There are a number of stakeholders involved in this, from the individual researcher working on hardware and software and other members of the organisation up to patient organisations and national health policymakers. Any of these could have an interest in exploring the potential and likely ethical aspects of such a technology. Let us take the example of the R&D leader of the company. As an employee of a company working in this space, she would likely be familiar with data protection and medical device regulation. However, by reflecting on the technology in light of the above points and guiding questions, she might come to consider the broader question of possible inferences to be drawn from the data. This could plausibly lead to a broadening of diagnostic capabilities or to a reduction of the data collected. The question how this technology would make users see themselves may be difficult to answer by a developer but might motivate more specific user testing. This fictitious but realistic example should show that the exact use of the insights produced in this article is very difficult to predict and context-dependent. At the same time, it is not difficult to envisage how it would help stakeholders broaden their understanding of a particular technology.

Our insight into emerging ethical issues is thus crucial to filling the AREA framework with life at a project level. We believe, however, that it goes beyond the operational phase and has relevance to strategy and policy. The key first step in the creation of a research policy environment conducive to RRI implementation is to create research culture and environment that value RRI. This has arguably already happened, as evidenced by the EU or UK EPSRC support for RRI. The next step consists of the creation of local incentives and processes that allow various stakeholders to innovate responsibly. There is a broad array of policy options that could achieve this aim (Jacob et al. 2013). Most, if not all, of these options require awareness and education of the stakeholders in question, so that they understand the rationale behind RRI and the way it is to be

put in practice. The insights developed in this article can make an important contribution to the growing awareness of ethical issues in ICT.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we have identified a set of ethical issues that are predicted to become relevant during the further development of a number of emerging ICTs. We argue that there is much overlap between these issues and that the issues as outlined above have a high likelihood of becoming relevant across a broad range of ICTs. The academic contribution of the article is that it goes beyond the ethical analysis of individual technologies and offers an array of ethical issues that are likely to be relevant across different emerging ICTs.

Understanding the nature of these issues is a precondition of undertaking research and innovation responsibly. Principles of RRI are being promoted by research funders as well as scholars interested in research governance and policy. Implementing RRI is justified from an instrumental perspective in the sense that it can help avoid public backlash against innovation. More importantly, it can be seen as an integral part of science governance in a democratic society.

Having an understanding of the ethical issues can help policymakers as well as researchers and other stakeholders reflect on possible technology trajectories and outcomes. On this basis the various other components of RRI can be tailored to a particular technology. These components could include public engagement and outreach, but equally well the choice of appropriate development methodologies or project management techniques.

This article therefore makes an important contribution to the academic discourse on ethics and computing and RRI. It furthermore provides important input to practice and policy.

However, we realise that the article has limitations. The description of ethical issues, while relevant and important cannot claim to be complete or comprehensive. The relatively abstract account of ethical issues we offer does not explain in depth how these issues would play out in practice. This requires detailed analysis of a technology and its likely context of use. Moreover, it is possible that new ethical issues will develop, either based on new technical capabilities or on the basis of changing moral perceptions. This raises the question of how the issues described in this article can be kept relevant and updated. The answer to this question will most likely involve a longer term commitment by research funders and research organisations to engage with these questions. It will require the building of a shared knowledge base that will allow stakeholders to contribute their insights and interact with one another. Initial systems that aim to achieve this have been proposed by various research projects, such as the observatories of the UK Framework for Responsible Research and Innovation in ICT project (<http://www.responsible-innovation.org.uk>), the EU project on a Global Model and Observatory for International Responsible Research and Innovation Coordination (<http://www.observatory-rrri.info/>), or the RRI Tools project (<http://www.rri-tools.eu>). At present none of these have found a way of sustaining the effort of updating insights beyond the period of project funding, which will be a requirement for RRI to be self-sustaining.

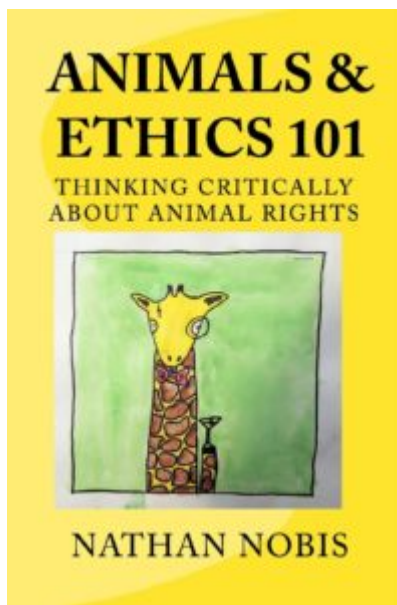
In addition to these fundamental epistemological issues concerning the ethical issues themselves, there are further practical problems that need to be addressed in order for the understanding of ethics of emerging ICTs to become practically relevant. These include the question of dissemination and communication, in particular to policymakers (Nehme et al. 2012). Publishing the issues and guiding questions in an academic journal renders them visible to some stakeholders, but inaccessible to others. A broader mechanism for dissemination to stakeholders may be required. Moreover, there is a general question of RRI that concerns the incentives for stakeholders to engage with it. Funders may have



political aims, such as increasing public participation and thereby hopefully acceptability and acceptance of new technologies. It is currently not always clear how such policy objectives would translate into organisational or individual incentives. One particular question concerns the role of private companies in RRI. Businesses represent the majority of investment into R&I but it is not always clear how RRI can fit in their existing organisational structures and processes.

These limitations show that RRI is not a matter of simple implementation. It remains a complex social process that will require negotiation between different parties with different interests. It is impossible to foresee the outcomes of this process in any particular case. However, there seems to be sufficient momentum behind this movement to allow for the expectation that the term will remain key to the research governance and policy in the foreseeable future. In order to have an impact, RRI will require much detailed work that can guide the various stakeholders in recognising and realising their responsibilities. Articles such as this one are required to render the processes of RRI workable and relevant. Overall, this should lead to orienting R&I towards social desirability and acceptability.

## 57. Animal Rights



*Animals and Ethics 101* helps readers identify and evaluate the arguments for and against various uses of animals, such as:

- Is it morally wrong to experiment on animals? Why or why not?
- Is it morally permissible to eat meat? Why or why not?
- Are we morally obligated to provide pets with veterinary care (and, if so, how much?)? Why or why not?

And other challenging issues and questions. Developed as a companion volume to an [online “Animals & Ethics” course](#), it is ideal for classroom use, discussion groups or self study. The book presupposes no conclusions on these controversial moral questions about the treatment of animals, and argues for none

either. Its goal is to help the reader better engage the issues and arguments on all sides with greater clarity, understanding and argumentative rigor. Nathan Nobis, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA USA.

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<http://animalethics101.blogspot.com/p/contents-toc-o-h-z-u-chapter-1.html>



PART VII

APPENDIX



# 58. Reading Philosophical Texts

The assignments in your course require you to engage in a close reading of significant texts written by the major philosophers of the Western tradition. Since you may have had little experience in dealing with material of this sort, the prospect may be a little daunting at first. Philosophical prose is carefully crafted to achieve its own purposes, and reading it well requires a similar degree of care. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Do the assigned reading**

The philosophical texts simply are the content of the course; if you do not read, you will not learn. Coming to class without having read and listening to the discourse of those who have is no substitute for grappling with the material on your own. You can't develop intellectual independence if you rely for your information on the opinions of other people, even when they happen to be correct.

- **Consider the context**

Philosophical writing, like literature of any genre, arises from a concrete historical setting. Approaching each text, you should keep in mind who wrote it, when and where it was published, for what audience it was originally intended, what purposes it was supposed to achieve, and how it has been received by the philosophical and general communities since its appearance. Introductory matter in your textbooks and the Internet resources accessed through the course syllabus will help you get off to a good start.

- **Take your time**

Careful reading cannot be rushed; you should allow plenty of time for a leisurely perusal of the material assigned each day. Individual learning styles certainly differ: some people function best by reading the same text several times with progressively more detailed attention; others prefer to work through the text patiently and diligently a single time. In either case, encourage yourself to slow down and engage the text at a personal level.

- **Spot crucial passages**

Although philosophers do not deliberately spin out pointlessly excessive verbiage (no, really!), most philosophical texts vary in density from page to page. It isn't always obvious what matters most; philosophers sometimes glide superficially over the very points on which their entire argument depends. But with the practice you'll be getting week by week, you'll soon be able to highlight the most important portions of each assignment.

- **Identify central theses**

Each philosophical text is intended to convince us of the truth of particular propositions. Although these central theses are sometimes stated clearly and explicitly, authors often choose to present them more subtly in the context of the line of reasoning which they are established. Remember that the thesis may be either positive or negative, either the acceptance or the rejection of a philosophical position. At the most general level, you may find it helpful to survey the exam study questions in your course study aids file as you read each assigned text.

- **Locate supportive arguments**

Philosophers do not merely state opinions but also undertake to establish their truth. The methods employed to support philosophical theses can differ widely, but most of them will be expressed one of the forms of logical



argumentation. That is, the philosopher will (explicitly or implicitly) offer premises that are clearly true and then claim that a sound inference from these premises leads inexorably to the desired conclusion. Although a disciplined study of the forms of logical reasoning is helpful, you'll probably learn to recognize the most common patterns from early examples in your reading.

- **Assess the arguments**

Arguments are not all of equal cogency; we are obliged to accept the conclusion only if it is supported by correct inference from true premises. Thus, there are two different ways in which to question the legitimacy of a particular argument:

- Ask whether the premises are true. (Remember that one or more of the premises of the argument may be unstated assumptions.)
- Ask whether the inference from premises to conclusion is sound. (Here it will be helpful to think of applying the same pattern of reasoning to a more familiar case.)

If all else fails, you may question the truth of the conclusion directly by proposing a counter-example which seems obviously to contradict it.

- **Look for connections**

Since these texts occur within a tradition, they are often directly related to each other. Within your reading of a particular philosopher, notice the way in which material in one portion of the text links up with material from another. As the semester proceeds, consider the ways in which each philosopher incorporates, appropriates, rejects, or responds to the work of those who have gone before. Finally, make every possible effort to relate this philosophical text to what you already know from courses in other disciplines and from your own life experiences.

Above all else, don't worry! You'll spend most of your class time going over the assigned readings, often in great detail. You'll have plenty of opportunities to learn what other readers have found, to ask questions for clarification of puzzling passages, and to share your own insights with others. As the semester proceeds, you will grow ever more confident in your own capacity to interpret philosophical texts.

## 59. Philosophical Dialogue

Verbal discussion of serious topics is in no way tangential to the practice of philosophy. From Socratic gatherings to the philosophical conventions of today, thinking things through out loud—and in the presence of others—has always been of the essence of the philosophical method. (Most philosophical texts embody this give-and-take, either in explicit use of dialogue form or by a more subtle alteration of proposal, objection, and reply in expository prose.) Your philosophical education demands that you enter into the great conversation of Western thought. A few suggestions may help:

- **Be prepared**

Productive dialogue presupposes informed participants. This means that during every class session, each of us will have read the material assigned for the day, we will pay careful attention to what others have already said, and we will think carefully before speaking. Of course, each of us will often be mistaken, but none of us should ever speak randomly.

- **Respect others**

Joint participants in dialogue show a deep, personal respect for each other. We owe it to each other to listen well and to give each other the benefit of doubt in interpreting charitably what has been said, trying always to see the worthwhile point. Although we will rarely find ourselves in total agreement on the issues at stake, we will never attack or make fun of each other personally.

- **Expect conflict**

Disagreement with an expressed opinion and criticism of its putative support is *not* disrespectful; it is an acknowledgment that we are taking the matter seriously. The more significant the issue under discussion, the more

likely our exchanges will become passionate, even heated. But we must always deal with each other fairly, helping each other to see the light.

- **Quality counts more than quantity**

No discussion will be perfectly balanced among its participants, and each of us will have days on which we are quieter or more vocal. But no one should dominate the conversation, nor should anyone be utterly silent. If you find yourself speaking too much, try to listen more; if you find yourself saying too little, look for opportunities to contribute. But always remember that it is what you say, not the fact of your speaking, that matters.

- **Ask questions**

Not every contribution to the dialogue needs to be the proposal or defence of a thesis. It is always proper to ask for a clarification of the meaning of something that has already been said or for the justification of a claim that has already been made. (Those who are naturally quiet may find that a well-timed question is the most comfortable way to participate in the dialogue.)

Above all, remember that philosophical discussion is a cooperative activity, aiming at a mutual achievement of truth (or, at least, convergence on a shared opinion). It is not a competition in which “points” are to be scored against an opponent. We are working together, and each can learn from all.

## 60. Electronic Forum

Conducting an on-line discussion during the semester enables us to expand our study of philosophy beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of traditional class meetings. If you've not participated in this way extensively before, it may take a little energy to get started, but you'll soon find this medium a comfortable one for communicating with the entire group. Early in the session, we'll get to know each other and learn to manage our networking tools effectiely.

Here are a few general ground rules for getting started on the electronic forum:

- **Check the discussion space frequently**

Every member of the class will be contributing multiple messages each week—perhaps one or two substantive efforts and several short comments. This means that your list of messages will pile up pretty quickly. You'll want to read it daily, or at least several times a week, so that you have a chance to chime in on a subject before we move on to something else.

- **Avoid lengthy quotes**

When responding to someone else's comments, don't quote the whole message—we've all seen it already. Just mention the person's name, the date of the message, and quote the few crucial lines that provide a context for what you want to say. (Some identification is a good idea, since we'll all be "speaking" at once.)

- **Never be deliberately offensive**

Lacking the visual cues present in face-to-face communication, typed electronic messages can easily seem more harsh than they were intended to be. Even in the passion of a vigorous philosophical exchange, let's try to be considerate of each other on both sides—in writing

and in reading—by assuming the best. No “flaming,” please.

Remember that this substitute for the more traditional methods of discussion is still unfamiliar for some of us. That’s no reason to be timid: let’s plunge in, try everything we can think of, learn from our mistakes and from our successes, and enjoy the adventure.

# 6I. Writing Philosophy

Write to learn. Expressing your thoughts is an excellent way of discovering what they really are. Even when you're the only one who ever sees the results of your explorations, trying to put them down in written form often helps, and when you wish to communicate to others, the ability to write clear, meaningful prose is vital. Here are some suggestions for proceeding:

- **Understand the assignment**

Whether you're completing a specific assignment or developing your own project, it is important to have the aims firmly in mind. Focus on a single question you wish to address, be clear about your own answer to it, and explicitly state a thesis that answers the question. You will often want to divide the central issue into several smaller questions, each with its own answer, and this will naturally lead to a coherent structure for the entire essay.

- **Interpret fairly**

Most of your writing projects will begin with a careful effort to interpret a philosophical text, and this step should never be taken lightly. Your first responsibility is to develop an accurate reading of the original text; then your criticism can begin. Focus primarily on the adequacy of the arguments which support the stated conclusions. If you disagree, you can look for the weaknesses of that support; if you agree, you can defend it against possible attacks.

- **Support your thesis**

Don't just state your own position; make it the conclusion of a line of reasoning. Claim only what you can prove (or are, at least, prepared to defend), and support it with evidence and argument. Philosophy is not just a list of true opinions, but the reasoned effort to provide justification.

- **Consider alternatives**

Be sure to explore arguments on all sides of the issue you address. Of course you will want to emphasize the reasoning that supports your thesis, but it is also important to consider likely objections and to respond with counter-arguments. Be especially carefully in your use of examples: the best positive example can only clarify meaning and lend some evidentiary confirmation, but a single counter-example disproves a general claim completely.

- **Omit the unnecessary**

Include in your written work only what is germane to your topic: after the first draft, mercilessly eliminate from your text anything that does not directly and uniquely support the thesis. Padding with irrelevant or redundant material is never worthwhile. Be particularly careful in your use of material prepared by others: **do not** plagiarize, paraphrase without attribution, quote directly often or at length, or rely extensively on a single secondary source.

- **Write clearly**

It is your responsibility as writer to express yourself in a way that can be understood. Use specific, concrete language in active voice whenever you can. Define your terms explicitly and use them consistently throughout your paper.

Finally, you may find it helpful to keep an appropriate audience in mind as you write. Don't write just for the instructor and your classmates—that is, don't assume that your audience has professional knowledge of the philosophical texts or total awareness of every conversation that has taken place, inside and outside the classroom. Unless otherwise directed by the details of a particular assignment, think of yourself as presenting the material to a friend, your parents, or a class: intelligent, interested people who are well-



informed generally but who lack your knowledge of the philosophical issues. Write to teach.

# 62. Guidelines for Philosophy Papers

Philosophical writing is different from the writing you'll be asked to do in other courses. Most of the strategies described below will also serve you well when writing for other courses, but don't automatically assume that they all will. Nor should you assume that every writing guideline you've been given by other teachers is important when you're writing a philosophy paper. Some of those guidelines are routinely violated in good philosophical prose (e.g., see the [guidelines on grammar](#), below).

## Contents

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  - [Three Stages of Writing](#)
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- 

## What Does One Do in a Philosophy Paper?

1. A philosophy paper consists of the reasoned defense of some claim. Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the

opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to *defend* the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

So you can't just say:

My view is that P.

You must say something like:

My view is that P. I believe this because...

or:

I find that the following considerations...provide a convincing argument for P.

Similarly, don't just say:

Descartes says that Q.

Instead, say something like:

Descartes says that Q; however, the following thought-experiment will show that Q is not true...

or:

Descartes says that Q. I find this claim plausible, for the following reasons...

There are a variety of things a philosophy paper can aim to accomplish. It usually begins by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then it goes on to do one or two of the following:

- Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good
- Defend the argument or thesis against someone else's

criticism

- Offer reasons to believe the thesis
- Offer counter-examples to the thesis
- Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views about the thesis
- Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible
- Argue that certain philosophers are committed to the thesis by their other views, though they do not come out and explicitly endorse the thesis
- Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if it were true
- Revise the thesis, in the light of some objection

No matter which of these aims you set for yourself, **you have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make.** Students often feel that since it's clear to them that some claim is true, it does not need much argument. But it's very easy to overestimate the strength of your own position. After all, you already accept it. You should assume that your audience does not already accept your position; and you should treat your paper as an attempt to persuade such an audience. Hence, don't start with assumptions which your opponents are sure to reject. If you're to have any chance of persuading people, you have to start from common assumptions you all agree to.

2. A good philosophy paper is *modest* and makes a *small point*; but it makes that point clearly and straightforwardly, and it offers good reasons in support of it. People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish any earth-shattering conclusions in your 5-6 page paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace.
3. **Originality** The aim of these papers is for you to show that you

understand the material and that you're able to think critically about it. To do this, your paper does have to show some independent thinking.

That doesn't mean you have to come up with your own theory, or that you have to make a completely original contribution to human thought. There will be plenty of time for that later on. An ideal paper will be [clear and straightforward](#) (see below), will be accurate when it [attributes views to other philosophers](#) (see below), and will contain thoughtful critical responses to the texts we read. It need not always break completely new ground.

But you should try to come up with your own arguments, or your own way of elaborating or criticizing or defending some argument we looked at in class. Merely summarizing what others have said won't be enough.

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## Three Stages of Writing

### I. Early Stages

The early stages of writing a philosophy paper include everything you do *before* you sit down and write your first draft. These early stages will involve *writing*, but you won't yet be trying to write a complete paper. You should instead be taking notes on the readings, sketching out your ideas, trying to explain the main argument you want to advance, and composing an outline.

## *Discuss the issues with others*

As I said above, your papers are supposed to demonstrate that you understand and can think critically about the material we discuss in class. One of the best ways to check how well you understand that material is to try to explain it to someone who isn't already familiar with it. I've discovered time and again while teaching philosophy that I couldn't really explain properly some article or argument I thought I understood. This was because it was really more problematic or complicated than I had realized. You will have this same experience. So it's good to discuss the issues we raise in class with each other, and with friends who aren't taking the class. This will help you understand the issues better, and it will make you recognize what things you still don't fully understand.

It's even more valuable to talk to each other about what you want to argue in your paper. When you have your ideas worked out well enough that you can explain them to someone else, verbally, then you're ready to sit down and start making an outline.

## *Make an outline*

Before you begin writing any drafts, you need to think about the questions: In what order should you explain the various terms and positions you'll be discussing? At what point should you present your opponent's position or argument? In what order should you offer your criticisms of your opponent? Do any of the points you're making presuppose that you've already discussed some other point, first? And so on.

The overall clarity of your paper will greatly depend on its structure. That is why it is important to think about these questions before you begin to write.

I strongly recommend that you make an outline of your paper, and of the arguments you'll be presenting, before you begin to write.

This lets you organize the points you want to make in your paper and get a sense for how they are going to fit together. It also helps ensure that you're in a position to say what your main argument or criticism is, before you sit down to write a full draft of your paper. When students get stuck writing, it's often because they haven't yet figured out what they're trying to say.

Give your outline your full attention. It should be fairly detailed. (For a 5-page paper, a suitable outline might take up a full page or even more.)

I find that making an outline is at least 80% of the work of writing a good philosophy paper. If you have a good outline, the rest of the writing process will go much more smoothly.

### *Start Work Early*

Philosophical problems and philosophical writing require careful and extended reflection. Don't wait until two or three nights before the paper is due to begin. That is very stupid. Writing a good philosophy paper takes a great deal of preparation.

You need to leave yourself enough time to think about the topic and write a detailed outline. Only then should you sit down to write a complete draft. Once you have a complete draft, you should set it aside for a day or two. Then you should come back to it and rewrite it. Several times. *At least* 3 or 4. If you can, show it to your friends and get their reactions to it. Do they understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them?

All of this takes time. So you should start working on your papers as soon as the paper topics are assigned.

## 2. Write a Draft

Once you've thought about your argument, and written an outline for your paper, then you're ready to sit down and compose a complete draft.

### *Use simple prose*

Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. We'll make fun of you if you use big words where simple words will do. These issues are deep and difficult enough without your having to muddy them up with pretentious or verbose language. **Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it.**

You may think that since your TA and I already know a lot about this subject, you can leave out a lot of basic explanation and write in a super-sophisticated manner, like one expert talking to another. I guarantee you that this will make your paper incomprehensible.

If your paper sounds as if it were written for a third-grade audience, then you've probably achieved the right sort of clarity.

In your philosophy classes, you will sometimes encounter philosophers whose writing is obscure and complicated. Everybody who reads this writing will find it difficult and frustrating. The authors in question are philosophically important *despite* their poor writing, not because of it. So do not try to emulate their writing styles.

### *Make the structure of your paper obvious*

You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader.



Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it.

How can you do this?

First of all, use connective words, like:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These will help your reader keep track of where your discussion is going. Be sure you use these words correctly! If you say “P. Thus Q.” then you are claiming that P is a good reason to accept Q. You had better be right. If you aren't, we'll complain. Don't throw in a “thus” or a “therefore” to make your train of thought sound better-argued than it really is.

Another way you can help make the structure of your paper obvious is by telling the reader what you've done so far and what you're going to do next. You can say things like:

- I will begin by...
- Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...
- These passages suggest that...
- I will now defend this claim...
- Further support for this claim comes from...
- For example...

These signposts really make a big difference. Consider the following two paper fragments:

...We've just seen how X says that P. I will now present two arguments that not-P. My first argument is...

My second argument that not-P is...

X might respond to my arguments in several ways. For instance, he could say that...

However this response fails, because...

Another way that X might respond to my arguments is by claiming that...

This response also fails, because...

So we have seen that none of X's replies to my argument that not-P succeed. Hence, we should reject X's claim that P.

I will argue for the view that Q.

There are three reasons to believe Q. Firstly...

Secondly...

Thirdly...

The strongest objection to Q says...

However, this objection does not succeed, for the following reason...

Isn't it easy to see what the structure of these papers is? You want it to be just as easy in your own papers.

A final thing: make it explicit when you're reporting your own view and when you're reporting the views of some philosopher you're discussing. The reader should never be in doubt about whose claims you're presenting in a given paragraph.

You can't make the structure of your paper obvious if you don't know what the structure of your paper is, or if your paper has no structure. That's why making an outline is so important.

*Be concise, but explain yourself fully*

To write a good philosophy paper, you need to be *concise* but at the same time *explain yourself fully*.

These demands might seem to pull in opposite directions. (It's as if the first said "Don't talk too much," and the second said "Talk a lot.") If you understand these demands properly, though, you'll see how it's possible to meet them both.

- We tell you to be *concise* because we don't want you to ramble

on about everything you know about a given topic, trying to show how learned and intelligent you are. Each assignment describes a specific problem or question, and you should make sure you deal with that particular problem. Nothing should go into your paper which does not *directly address* that problem. Prune out everything else. It is always better to concentrate on one or two points and develop them in depth than to try to cram in too much. One or two well-mapped paths are better than an impenetrable jungle. Formulate the central problem or question you wish to address at the beginning of your paper, and keep it in mind at all times. Make it clear what the problem is, and why it is a problem. Be sure that everything you write is relevant to that central problem. In addition, be sure to say in the paper *how* it is relevant. Don't make your reader guess.

- One thing I mean by “explain yourself fully” is that, when you have a good point, you shouldn't just toss it off in one sentence. Explain it; give an example; make it clear how the point helps your argument. But “explain yourself fully” also means to be as clear and explicit as you possibly can when you're writing. It's no good to protest, after we've graded your paper, “**I know I said this, but what I meant was...**” [Say exactly what you mean](#), in the first place. Part of what you're being graded on is how well you can do that.

Pretend that your reader has not read the material you're discussing, and has not given the topic much thought in advance. This will of course not be true. But if you write as if it were true, it will force you to explain any technical terms, to illustrate strange or obscure distinctions, and to be as explicit as possible when you summarize what some other philosopher said.



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In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is *lazy*, *stupid*, and *mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid*, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's *mean*, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.) If you understand the material you're writing about, and if you aim your paper at such a reader, you'll probably get an A.

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### *Use plenty of examples and definitions*

It is very important to use examples in a philosophy paper. Many of the claims philosophers make are very abstract and hard to understand, and examples are the best way to make those claims clearer.

Examples are also useful for explaining the notions that play a central role in your argument. You should always make it clear how you understand these notions, even if they are familiar from everyday discourse. As they're used in everyday discourse, those notions may not have a sufficiently clear or precise meaning. For instance, suppose you're writing a paper about abortion, and you want to assert the claim "[A fetus is a person.](#)" What do you mean by "a person"? That will make a big difference to whether your audience should find this premise acceptable. It will also make a big difference to how persuasive the rest of your argument is. By itself, the following argument is pretty worthless:

[A fetus is a person.](#)

[It's wrong to kill a person.](#)

[Therefore, it's wrong to kill a fetus.](#)

For we don't know what the author *means* by calling a fetus "a person." On some interpretations of "person," it might be quite obvious that a fetus is a person; but quite controversial whether it's

always wrong to kill persons, in that sense of “person.” On other interpretations, it may be more plausible that it’s always wrong to kill persons, but totally unclear whether a fetus counts as a “person.” So everything turns here on what the author means by “person.” The author should be explicit about how he is using this notion.

In a philosophy paper, it’s okay to use words in ways that are somewhat different from the ways they’re ordinarily used. You just have to make it clear that you’re doing this. For instance, some philosophers use the word “person” to mean any being which is capable of rational thought and self-awareness. Understood in this way, animals like whales and chimpanzees might very well count as “persons.” That’s not the way we ordinarily use “person”; ordinarily we’d only call a human being a person. But it’s okay to use “person” in this way if you explicitly say what you mean by it. And likewise for other words.

### **Don’t vary your vocabulary just for the sake of variety**

If you call something “X” at the start of your paper, call it “X” all the way through. So, for instance, don’t start talking about “Plato’s view of the *self*,” and then switch to talking about “Plato’s view of the *soul*,” and then switch to talking about “Plato’s view of the *mind*.” If you mean to be talking about the same thing in all three cases, then call it by the same name. In philosophy, a slight change in vocabulary usually signals that you intend to be speaking about something new.

### **Using words with precise philosophical meanings**

Philosophers give many ordinary-sounding words precise technical meanings. Consult the handouts on [Philosophical Terms and Methods](#) to make sure you’re using these words correctly. Don’t use words that you don’t fully understand. Use technical philosophical terms only where you need them. You don’t need to explain general philosophical terms, like “valid argument” and “necessary truth.” But you should explain any technical terms you use which bear on the specific topic you’re discussing. So, for instance, if you use any specialized terms

like “dualism” or “physicalism” or “behaviorism,” you should explain what these mean. Likewise if you use technical terms like “supervenience” and the like. Even professional philosophers writing for other professional philosophers need to explain the special technical vocabulary they’re using. Different people sometimes use this special vocabulary in different ways, so it’s important to make sure that you and your readers are all giving these words the same meaning. Pretend that your readers have never heard them before.

### *Presenting and assessing the views of others*

If you plan to discuss the views of Philosopher X, begin by figuring out what his arguments or central assumptions are. See my tips on [How To Read a Philosophy Paper](#) for some help doing this.

Then ask yourself: Are X’s arguments good ones? Are his assumptions clearly stated? Are they plausible? Are they reasonable starting-points for X’s argument, or ought he have provided some independent argument for them?

Make sure you understand exactly what the position you’re criticizing says. Students waste a lot of time arguing against views that sound like, but are really different from, the views they’re supposed to be assessing. Remember, philosophy demands a high level of precision. It’s not good enough for you merely to get the *general idea* of somebody else’s position or argument. You have to get it exactly right. (In this respect, philosophy is more like a science than the other humanities.) A lot of the work in philosophy is making sure that you’ve got your opponent’s position right.

You can assume that [your reader](#) is stupid (see above). But don’t treat the philosopher or the views you’re discussing as stupid. If they were stupid, we wouldn’t be looking at them. If you can’t see anything the view has going for it, maybe that’s because you don’t have much experience thinking and arguing about the view, and

so you haven't yet fully understood why the view's proponents are attracted to it. Try harder to figure out what's motivating them.

Philosophers sometimes do say outrageous things, but if the view you're attributing to a philosopher seems to be *obviously crazy*, then you should think hard about whether he really does say what you think he says. Use your imagination. Try to figure out what reasonable position the philosopher could have had in mind, and direct your arguments against *that*.

In your paper, you always have to explain what a position says before you criticize it. If you don't explain what you take Philosopher X's view to be, your reader cannot judge whether the criticism you offer of X is a good criticism, or whether it is simply based on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of X's views. So tell the reader what it is you think X is saying.

Don't try to tell the reader everything you know about X's views, though. You have to go on to offer your own philosophical contribution, too. **Only summarize those parts of X's views that are directly relevant to what you're going to go on to do.**

Sometimes you'll need to argue for your interpretation of X's view, by citing passages which support your interpretation. It is permissible for you to discuss a view you think a philosopher *might* have held, or should have held, though you can't find any direct evidence of that view in the text. When you do this, though, you should explicitly say so. Say something like:

Philosopher X doesn't explicitly say that P, but it seems to me that he's assuming it anyway, because...

## Quotations

When a passage from a text is particularly useful in supporting your interpretation of some philosopher's views, it may be helpful to quote the passage directly. (Be sure to specify where the passage can be found.) However, direct quotations should be used *sparingly*. It is seldom necessary to quote more than a few sentences. Often it will be more appropriate to paraphrase what X says, rather than to quote him directly. When you are

paraphrasing what somebody else said, be sure to say so. (And here too, cite the pages you're referring to.) Quotations should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. And when you do quote an author, you still have to explain what the quotation says *in your own words*. If the quoted passage contains an argument, reconstruct the argument in more explicit, straightforward terms. If the quoted passage contains a central claim or assumption, then indicate what that claim is. You may want to give some examples to illustrate the author's point. If necessary, you may want to distinguish the author's claim from other claims with which it might be confused.

### **Paraphrases**

Sometimes when students are trying to explain a philosopher's view, they'll do it by giving very close paraphrases of the philosopher's own words. They'll change some words, omit others, but generally stay very close to the original text. For instance, Hume begins his TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE as follows:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.

Here's an example of how you *don't* want to paraphrase:

Hume says all perceptions of the mind are resolved into two kinds, impressions and ideas. The difference is in



how much force and liveliness they have in our thoughts and consciousness. The perceptions with the most force and violence are impressions. These are sensations, passions, and emotions. Ideas are the faint images of our thinking and reasoning.

There are two main problems with paraphrases of this sort. In the first place, it's done rather mechanically, so it doesn't show that the author understands the text. In the second place, since the author hasn't figured out what the text means well enough to express it in his own words, there's a danger that his paraphrase may inadvertently change the meaning of the text. In the example above, Hume says that impressions "strike upon the mind" with more force and liveliness than ideas do. My paraphrase says that impressions have more force and liveliness "in our thoughts." It's not clear whether these are the same thing. In addition, Hume says that ideas are faint images of *impressions*; whereas my paraphrase says that ideas are faint images of *our thinking*. These are not the same. So the author of the paraphrase appears not to have understood what Hume was saying in the original passage. A much better way of explaining what Hume says here would be the following:

Hume says that there are two kinds of 'perceptions,' or mental states. He calls these impressions and ideas. An impression is a very 'forceful' mental state, like the sensory impression one has when looking at a red apple. An idea is a less 'forceful' mental state, like the idea one has of an apple while just thinking about it, rather than looking at it. It is not so clear what Hume means here by 'forceful.' He might mean...

## *Anticipate objections*

Try to anticipate objections to your view and respond to them. For instance, if you object to some philosopher's view, don't assume he would immediately admit defeat. Imagine what his comeback might be. How would you handle that comeback?

Don't be afraid of mentioning objections to your own thesis. It is better to bring up an objection yourself than to hope your reader won't think of it. Explain how you think these objections can be countered or overcome. Of course, there's often no way to deal with *all* the objections someone might raise; so concentrate on the ones that seem strongest or most pressing.

## *What happens if you're stuck?*

Your paper doesn't always have to provide a definite solution to a problem, or a straight yes or no answer to a question. Many excellent philosophy papers don't offer straight yes or no answers. Sometimes they argue that the question needs to be clarified, or that certain further questions need to be raised. Sometimes they argue that certain assumptions of the question need to be challenged. Sometimes they argue that certain answers to the question are too easy, that is, they won't work. Hence, if these papers are right, the question will be *harder* to answer than we might previously have thought. These are all important and philosophically valuable results.

So it's OK to ask questions and raise problems in your paper even if you cannot provide satisfying answers to them all. You can leave some questions unanswered at the end of the paper. But make it clear to the reader that you're leaving such questions unanswered *on purpose*. And you should say *something* about how the question might be answered, and about what makes the question interesting and relevant to the issue at hand.

If something in a view you're examining is unclear to you, don't gloss it over. Call attention to the unclarity. Suggest several different ways of understanding the view. Explain why it's not clear which of these interpretations is correct.

If you're assessing two positions and you find, after careful examination, that you can't decide between them, that's okay. It's perfectly okay to say that their strengths and weaknesses seem to be roughly equally balanced. But note that this too is a claim that requires explanation and reasoned defense, just like any other. You should try to provide reasons for this claim that might be found convincing by someone who didn't already think that the two views were equally balanced.

Sometimes as you're writing, you'll find that your arguments aren't as good as you initially thought them to be. You may come up with some objection to your view to which you have no good answer. Don't panic. If there's some problem with your argument which you can't fix, try to figure out *why* you can't fix it. It's okay to change your thesis to one you can defend. For example, instead of writing a paper which provides a totally solid defense of view P, you can instead change tactics and write a paper which goes like this:

One philosophical view says that P. This is a plausible view, for the following reasons...

However, there are some reasons to be doubtful whether P. One of these reasons is X. X poses a problem for the view that P because...

It is not clear how the defender of P can overcome this objection.

Or you can write a paper which goes:

One argument for P is the 'Conjunction Argument,' which goes as follows...

At first glance, this is a very appealing argument. However, this argument is faulty, for the following reasons...

One might try to repair the argument, by...

But these repairs will not work, because...

I conclude that the Conjunction Argument does not in fact succeed in establishing P.

Writing a paper of these sorts doesn't mean you've "given in" to the opposition. After all, neither of these papers commits you to the view that not-P. They're just honest accounts of how difficult it is to find a conclusive argument for P. P might still be true, for all that.

### 3. Rewrite, and Keep Rewriting

Now you've written a complete draft of your paper. Set the draft aside for a day or two.

Then come back to the draft and re-read it. As you read each sentence, say things like this to yourself:

"Does this really make sense?" "That's totally unclear!" "That sounds pretentious." "What does that mean?" "What's the connection between these two sentences?" "Am I just repeating myself here?" and so on.

Make sure every sentence in your draft does useful work. Get rid of any which don't. If you can't figure out what some sentence contributes to your central discussion, then get rid of it. Even if it sounds nice. You should never introduce any points in your paper unless they're important to your main argument, and you have the room to really explain them.

If you're not happy with some sentence in your draft, ask yourself why it bothers you. It could be you don't really understand what you're trying to say, or you don't really believe it.

Make sure your sentences say exactly what you want them to say. For example, suppose you write "[Abortion is the same thing as murder.](#)" Is that what you really mean? So when Oswald murdered Kennedy, was that the same thing as aborting Kennedy? Or do you

mean something different? Perhaps you mean that abortion is *a form of murder*. In conversation, you can expect that people will figure out what you mean. But you shouldn't write this way. Even if your TA is able to figure out what you mean, it's bad writing. In philosophical prose, you have to be sure to say exactly what you mean.

Also pay attention to [the structure](#) of your draft. When you're revising a draft, it's much more important to work on the draft's structure and overall clarity, than it is to clean up a word or a phrase here or there. Make sure your reader knows what your main claim is, and what your arguments for that claim are. Make sure that your reader can tell what the point of every paragraph is. It's not enough that you know what their point is. It has to be obvious to your reader, even to a [lazy, stupid, and mean reader](#).

If you can, show your draft to your friends or to other students in the class, and get their comments and advice. I encourage you to do this. Do your friends understand your main point? Are parts of your draft unclear or confusing to them? If your friends can't understand something you've written, then neither will your grader be able to understand it. Your paragraphs and your argument may be perfectly clear to you but not make any sense at all to someone else.

Another good way to check your draft is to **read it out loud**. This will help you tell whether it all makes sense. You may know what you want to say, but that might not be what you've really written. Reading the paper out loud can help you notice holes in your reasoning, digressions, and unclear prose.

You should count on writing many drafts of your paper. At least 3 or 4!! Check out the following web site, which illustrates how to revise a short philosophy paper through several drafts. Notice how much the paper improves with each revision:

- Writing tutor for Introductory Philosophy Courses  
<<http://web.williams.edu/wp-etc/philosophy/jcruz/jcruz/writingtutor/>>.

## Minor Points

### *Beginning your paper*

Don't begin with a sentence like "Down through the ages, mankind has pondered the problem of..." There's no need to warm up to your topic. You should get right to the point, with the first sentence.

Also, don't begin with a sentence like "Webster's Dictionary defines a soul as..." Dictionaries aren't good philosophical authorities. They record the way words are used in everyday discourse. Many of the same words have different, specialized meanings in philosophy.

### *Grammar*

- It's OK to end a sentence with a preposition. It's also OK to split an infinitive, if you need to. (Sometimes the easiest way to say what you mean is by splitting an infinitive. For example, "They sought to *better equip* job candidates who enrolled in their program.") Efforts to avoid these often end up just confusing your prose.
- Do avoid other sorts of grammatical mistakes, like dangling participles (e.g., "*Hurt by her fall*, the tree fell right on Mary's leg before she could get out of the way"), and the like.
- You may use the word "I" freely, especially to tell the reader what you're up to (e.g., "*I've just explained why... Now I'm going to consider an argument that...*").
- Don't worry about using the verb "is" or "to be" too much. In a philosophy paper, it's OK to use this verb as much as you need to.

## *Secondary readings*

For most classes, I will put some articles and books on reserve in Bobst Library for additional reading. These are optional, and are for your independent study.

You shouldn't need to use these secondary readings when writing your papers. The point of the papers is to teach you how to analyze a philosophical argument, and present your own arguments for or against some conclusion. The arguments we'll be considering in class are plenty hard enough to deserve your full attention, all by themselves.

## *Can you write your paper as a dialogue or story?*

No. Done well, these forms of philosophical writing can be very effective. That's why we read some dialogues and stories in Philosophy 3. But these forms of philosophical writing are *extremely* difficult to do well. They tempt the author to be imprecise and to use unclear metaphors. You need to master ordinary philosophical writing before you can do a good job with these more difficult forms.

## *Mechanics*

Aim to make your papers *less than* or equal to the assigned word limit. Longer papers are typically too ambitious, or repetitious, or full of digressions. Your grade will suffer if your paper has these defects. So it's important to ask yourself: What are the most important things you have to say? What can be left out?

But neither should your papers be too short! Don't cut off an argument abruptly. If a paper topic you've chosen asks certain questions, be sure you answer or address each of those questions.

Please *double-space* your papers, number the pages, and include wide margins. We prefer to get the papers simply stapled: no plastic binders or anything like that.

Include your name on the paper. And don't turn in your only copy! (These things should be obvious, but apparently they're not.)

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## How You'll Be Graded

You'll be graded on three basic criteria:

1. How well do you understand the issues you're writing about?
2. How good are the arguments you offer?
3. Is your writing clear and well-organized?

More specifically, we'll be asking questions like these:

- Do you clearly state what you're trying to accomplish in your paper? Is it obvious to the reader what your main thesis is?
- Do you offer supporting arguments for the claims you make? Is it obvious to the reader what these arguments are?
- Is the structure of your paper clear? For instance, is it clear what parts of your paper are expository, and what parts are your own positive contribution?
- Is your prose simple, easy to read, and easy to understand?
- Do you illustrate your claims with good examples? Do you explain your central notions? Do you say exactly what you mean?
- Do you present other philosophers' views accurately



and charitably?

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The comments I find myself making on students' philosophy papers most often are these:



- “Explain this claim” or “What do you mean by this?” or “I don’t understand what you’re saying here”
- “This passage is unclear (or awkward, or otherwise hard to read)” “Too complicated” “Too hard to follow” “Simplify”
- “Why do you think this?” “This needs more support” “Why should we believe this?” “Explain why this is a reason to believe P” “Explain why this follows from what you said before”
- “Not really relevant”
- “Give an example?”

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Try to anticipate these comments and avoid the need for them!

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*Your paper should do some philosophical work*

Philosopher X assumes A and argues from there to B. B seems unattractive to me. Philosopher X just assumes A and doesn’t give any argument for it. I don’t think A is true. So I can just reject A and thereby avoid B.

*correct*

*right*

*philosophically engaged with*

Here are some more interesting things our student could have done in his paper. He could have argued that B doesn’t *really follow* from A, after all. Or he could have presented *reasons* for thinking that A is false. Or he could have argued that assuming A is an illegitimate move to make in a debate about whether B is true. Or something else of that sort. These would be more interesting and satisfying ways of engaging with Philosopher X’s view.

## *Responding to comments from me or your TA*

Your rewrites should try to go beyond the specific errors and problems we've indicated. If you got below an A-, then your draft was generally difficult to read, it was difficult to see what your argument was and what the structure of your paper was supposed to be, and so on. You can only correct these sorts of failings by rewriting your paper from scratch. (Start with a new, empty window in your word processor.) Use your draft and the comments you received on it to construct a new outline, and write from *that*.

Keep in mind that when I or your TA grade a rewrite, we may sometimes notice weaknesses in unchanged parts of your paper that we missed the first time around. Or perhaps those weaknesses will have affected our overall impression of the paper, and we just didn't offer any specific recommendation about fixing them. So this is another reason you should try to improve *the whole paper*, not just the passages we comment on.

It is possible to improve a paper without improving it enough to raise it to the next grade level. Sometimes that happens. But I hope you'll all do better than that.

Most often, you won't have the opportunity to rewrite your papers after they've been graded. So you need to teach yourself to write a draft, scrutinize the draft, and revise and rewrite your paper *before* turning it in to be graded.

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