

## Applied Ethics Primer

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# Introduction

Over the years, many branches of applied ethics have emerged. If you look at a university calendar you may find courses on computer ethics, environmental ethics, business ethics, and professional ethics, to name but a few. There are even subdisciplines within some of these branches. For instance, within bioethics one can now find research ethics, genetics, and health care ethics, and the list continues. If you are beginning to suspect that there is no type of activity that doesn't admit some sort of ethical analysis, then you're right. This is because ethics is a discipline that seeks to answer what is at once a simple, yet extremely difficult, question: What should I (or we) do? One might ask instead, "How should we live?" or, "What is a good life?" However, each of these questions are effectively different ways of asking much the same kind of thing.

It is tempting to rephrase the question "What should I do?" as "What *can* I do?" "What do I *want* to do?" "What do *other people want* me to do?" or "What is in *my best interests* for me to do?" If you do this, you are confusing an *ought* with an *is*. You are taking a normative question—in other words, a question that concerns what *ought* to be the case or what *ought* to be done—and trying to replace it with a descriptive question about some fact of the matter. In the case of the rephrased questions above, what is within my capacity, what I desire, what other people desire, or what benefits me, respectively.

Changing the normative question from what I or you (or someone else) *should* do to a descriptive question is, in effect, an effort to leave the ethical analysis up to someone else. The idea that this is a way of avoiding ethics is, however, an illusion. Most decision-making has a moral dimension. Part of being a mature, rational individual in a society is being accountable for one's decisions and actions. Even if we don't make the effort to consider whether our actions are right or wrong, others will.

This primer is a resource for helping you notice ethical issues and think your way through them. The intent is to give you tools to help you figure out what you (or others) *should* do so that you can weigh these moral considerations against what you can do, what you want to do, what others want you to do, and what is in your interests to do. Sometimes you will be fortunate enough to discover that the answers to these questions line up and you are not faced with a moral dilemma. All too frequently, however, you will find that if you really think about it, what you want to do, what is in your interests to do, or what others want you to do fail to accord with what you *should* do. What you *can* do provides the limit of the actions that are open to you. However, carefully considering ethical challenges can often help us revise our own sense of what is possible and recognize that more may be within our power than we might have initially thought.

This primer will not tell you what to do. That's up to you. Instead, it offers a variety of ways of thinking about ethics for you to apply yourself. Again, rational, adult humans are and should be held accountable for their actions. So, being able to articulate ethically sound reasons for your actions is important for being able to defend yourself to others who might disagree with your choices and behaviour.

Of course, context matters. This is one of the reasons why applied ethics subdisciplines abound. Nonetheless, there are commonalities among these areas as they all engage and take guidance from *normative ethical theory*. Normative ethics is the systematic study, development, and rational defence of basic values, moral concepts, and ethical theories. Ethicists offer theories that explain why some actions are right and others wrong and why some states of affairs, institutions or, indeed, people are good and others bad.

For well over two thousand years, philosophers from around the globe have been writing down what they take to be the right way to live and giving arguments for why we should act in one way or another. Of course, the practice of ethics is considerably older than the written record and has been an essential part of all human cultures for thousands of years. What we address here simply skims the surface of a few of these theories from a handful of cultures. There is

a predominance of theories from the European tradition, which reflects the discourses that have shaped most applied ethics written in English. This should not be taken to imply that the basic ideas in these theories are uniquely European nor that they are in some sense superior to their non-European counterparts.

We are currently in an era of post-colonial correction, and we can expect that many non-European theories will increasingly inform applied ethics. Moreover, the basic approaches discussed below can be found throughout ethical theories globally. So, along with some key figures and theories from European ethics, we will discuss ideas from various so-called “non-Western” traditions.

So, what are the kinds of tools that moral philosophers can offer? First are generic philosophical tools of careful criticism, including the analysis of important concepts, and argumentation. These are skills that are crucial to any philosophical work, which students would acquire and practice in any philosophy course. Second, there are the theories that moral philosophers have developed. Although there are many different theories, we will organize them into four basic approaches that focus on different things: [good consequences](#); [right action](#); [good character](#); and [good relationships](#). Many ethical theories actually touch on all of these aspects but emphasize one of them as a central commitment or starting point. Some moral frameworks and concepts don't neatly fit into any one of these four approaches, and we will discuss two of these—rights theory and ahimsa—after the rest in [Part IV](#).

While most normative ethicists are concerned to show why the ethical theory they defend is the right one, we will take a rather different approach. We will treat our four approaches as different lenses through which we can assess the various cases and situations that attract our attention.<sup>1</sup> Just as looking at a landscape through lenses that are tinted different colours makes different features of the landscape stand out, so thinking about ethical challenges through each of the basic approaches draws attention to certain moral features of these situations. Of course, one might think that one of these theories is in fact the *correct* account of morality and, indeed, many normative ethicists take this view and spend their careers defending one or other moral theory. Even so, it is still important to understand other theories to be able to sympathetically consider and assess other people's approaches to moral problems.

Before we get to the ethical lenses there are some preliminary issues that need to be addressed. In the next section, we will consider issues around moral response, reflection, and reason.

## Notes

1. Susan Sherwin, “Foundations, Frameworks, Lenses: The Role of Theories in Bioethics,” *Bioethics* 13, no. 3/4 (1999): 198-205.



PART I  
MORAL RESPONSE AND REFLECTION

# I. Moral Response

Often when we make moral judgements, we find they are tied up with our emotional reactions. For instance, we typically feel happy when good things happen to good people and angry when we witness things that we consider evil or unjust. We may also feel personal satisfaction at having done what we consider to be the right thing and pride in having it recognized. Similarly, we often feel guilt for acting badly and shame when others call us out for it. These familiar experiences are moral judgements just as much as emotional reactions.

Although emotions can be important and instructive by alerting us to moral issues, they are often not well justified on reflection. Indeed, in some instances, once we reflect on our emotions, we may find that they are ethically quite misleading. Even positive emotions, like love, may lead us to misjudge a situation, prompting us to defend friends or family members who have, in fact, behaved badly. Negative emotions can be equally misleading. Most of us have had the experience of being in a fit of anger and doing something (or at least thinking of doing something) that we later recognize was morally wrong. The Roman historian Tacitus believed that many people had a tendency to hate those whom they had injured.<sup>1</sup> This insight that our emotional reactions to our own bad behaviour might distort our perception of our victims in ways that would make us prone to harm them yet further should trouble anyone who is inclined to let their emotions govern their actions.

If we cannot rely on our emotions to guide our actions, where might we turn? We might think about how others will judge our actions or how they would act were they in our place. Again, this can be instructive in terms of alerting us to moral considerations (as we shall see in sections 3.9 and 3.10 below). Nonetheless, this is typically insufficient for coming to a justified moral judgement. There are good reasons for this. There are many biases in our society and many people who behave badly. If we simply judge as others judge and follow what others do or what they expect us to do, we may end up making some terrible judgements and engaging in some heinous behaviour.

It can be deeply disturbing to discover that those who hold a respected place in our community or the people we love have immoral attitudes or have engaged in morally repugnant behaviour. Nonetheless, if we truly care about doing the right thing, we must be open to making such discoveries. We may even discover that attitudes or conventions that are widely accepted in our society are nonetheless morally pernicious.

Of course, many social conventions are perfectly morally acceptable, some may even be morally required. After all, conventional norms and practices offer a set of rules for behaviour that help the members of society understand one another and fruitfully interact with each other. However, in order to be able to distinguish conventions that are useful and good from those that are bigoted and bad we need to go beyond the conventions themselves. This is where normative ethics, philosophical analysis and argument come in.

## STOP & THINK

Take a moment to consider a norm or a practice that was (or perhaps is) thought to be ethically acceptable in some culture or society (perhaps even your own) that you believe is morally wrong.

**Now try to articulate the reasons why it's wrong.**

You have just started doing moral philosophy!

## Notes

1. Tacitus, *Project Gutenberg's The Germany and the Agricola of Tacitus* (Project Gutenberg, 2013), Agricola para. 42, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7524/7524-h/7524-h.htm>.

## 2. Reflection

Now, one might reasonably wonder how we can discover that we ourselves or members of our community have been following customs that are morally wrong if we are located in societies and communities that follow these customs. This is where moral theory, conceptual analysis, and argumentation come in. We can use moral theories to assess the norms, conventions, and practices of our own communities. Even so, it is difficult to understand how things might be different from within our own culture. This is where outside perspectives are particularly valuable.

As a number of philosophers who study the theory of knowledge have argued, the critical eye of people with very different beliefs, norms, and values to our own can be extremely useful for assessing the claims we endorse and the things we do. The idea is that if a claim or practice can withstand criticism from a wide variety of different perspectives with very different assumptions then it must be pretty good, or at least it is likely to be morally acceptable. It is rather like using a variety of different experiments to test the same hypothesis. If your hypothesis is confirmed using a wide array of very different experimental designs, then science has given you a good reason for thinking it is likely right. (Notice, that this process does not give us grounds for dogmatically asserting the absolute truth of our discovery in either science or ethics.) This assessment must be done in good faith. In the same way that if we value scientific knowledge we should welcome having multiple rigorous tests of our favored theories, if we want to do the right thing we should be open to criticism from a wide variety of different people whose views are very different from our own. Of course, others may or may not be right in their criticisms. Either way, being able to understand them and identify why they are right or wrong will give us insight into the ethical issues and better justification for our own ethical decisions.

Unfortunately, we often don't have access to a variety of people from many different backgrounds to give us feedback on our ideas and activities. Even if we do, these folks may have better things to do than help us with our moral dilemmas. Fortunately, we do have access to published work by thinkers from around the globe and we can draw on this and our own imaginations to guess what those who disagree with us might say. This kind of dialogic reasoning—where one puts forward one's own view, then comes up with objections to that view, and then responds to those objections—is characteristic of philosophical work (we will discuss this more in [section II](#)). If you want to do the right thing then sincerely considering arguments both for and against the various possible actions that are open to you is one of the best ways of ensuring that you do.

Now, it might reasonably be asked whether such a process of rational reflection, judgement, and action will always provide the right answer. Philosophers have disagreed on this point, at least in principle. However, the very fact of their disagreement suggests that, for practical purposes, all philosophers are going to have to admit that seemingly rational people do *in fact* disagree about moral issues and sometimes these disagreements are intractable.

### 3. Disagreement

It is worth articulating the different ways in which philosophers disagree as this will help us better analyze and assess competing theories. Sometimes philosophers disagree about the facts. For instance, two philosophers might share the same basic normative theory but disagree about relevant features of the world. Suppose two philosophers agree that what matters morally is to make people as happy as possible. However, one believes that, psychologically speaking, what actually makes people happy is ensuring their safety, while the other believes that happiness depends on maximizing people's freedom. Both agree that happiness is a particular emotional state, but they disagree about the facts about what causes it. Notice that if they both really care about doing the right thing, they are probably going to want to look at some empirical work here. For example, one might consider research in social psychology to see what really does make people happy.

Another possibility is that they disagree about what happiness *means* or, alternatively, what *type* of happiness is morally relevant. One might think that *true happiness* is an emotional state that is experienced moment to moment while the other might think that *true happiness* depends on achievement and overcoming various struggles and obstacles over a lifetime. This brings us back to philosophy. These philosophers are effectively disagreeing about what a certain concept means. Scientific investigations are unlikely to be helpful. Even if one thinks that the concept in question is empirically tractable, suggesting we can discover what happiness is with a properly designed experiment, they are still going to have to convince the other person that science can tell us this, which bring us back into the realm of philosophy. Basically, if you are trying to rationally convince someone of something that goes beyond the agreed-upon facts, you are likely doing philosophy.

Finally, we might simply accept different moral theories or rank them differently in importance. One might think that maximizing happiness is the single most important moral goal while the other thinks it is irrelevant because freedom is the only thing that matters morally, whether it makes you happy or not. Here again, there is philosophical work to be done and they will try to convince each other.

**Notice that if we agree about the facts, moral concepts, and the applicable moral theory we should agree about the right course of action.** If we are reasoning carefully and disagree about the right course of action it is almost certainly because we disagree about the relevant facts, the meaning of moral concepts, or the relevant moral theories.

**Importantly, whatever we decide to do, we are morally responsible for the outcome of that decision—good or bad. We should expect to be held accountable for our actions.** Happily, if we have carefully considered our options, listened to and learned from those who disagree, and looked at the situation through each ethical lens and from all relevant perspectives, we can expect to have a robust and convincing justification for our actions.

In applied contexts, there is the possibility that even if we disagree about the facts, the interpretation of moral concepts, and the correct normative theories we may nonetheless agree about what the right action is in a given situation. This gives us another reason for not just choosing one moral theory over the others but instead taking a more pluralistic approach. If we can show that the same action is required by a broad set of very different moral theories, then this becomes very powerful evidence that the action is morally required. So, even if you are inclined to think that one of the approaches discussed below is right to the exclusion of the others, you may be able to provide far more compelling arguments if you notice when theories agree.

PART II  
REASON AND ARGUMENT

## 4. Reason

This brings us to the subject of argument. If we are reasonable, we will, presumably, have reasons for our positions. If we want to convince others of our own position, then we will want to put these reasons into a logical order so that they form a strong argument. Logic is a subdiscipline of philosophy that is as old as ethics and, like ethics, it has a global history woven into parallel histories of rhetoric and theories about language. Although formal logic has dominated discussions of logic in the European traditions for the last two centuries, it tends to have a limited application in applied ethics discussions. So, we will take a rather broader approach that includes, but is not restricted to, some of the inference patterns of formal logic.

At this point, we're inclined to direct you to a rather ancient, albeit classic, skit by the British comedy troupe, Monty Python. (So here it is!)



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<https://caul-cbua.pressbooks.pub/aep/?p=63#oembed-1>

In their “Argument Sketch,” they discuss and exemplify both what philosophical argument is and what it isn’t. Part of what comes out in this skit is the fact that we use the word “argument” in a number of different ways. We can see three different senses of the term in the skit, only two of which are philosophical. The first sense is when people who disagree about something (or think they disagree) yell at each other. This is not the philosophical sense of argument. It is correlated with it, however, as sometimes people who are engaged in such yelling matches at least started out with each taking up a contrary position and trying to convince the other.

This second sense of argument is basically a synonym for debate. Two or more parties take up contrary positions on a point and try to convince the other(s). This is “an intellectual process,” as one of the characters points out, and a practice that is crucial to philosophy. It is not mere contradiction because *reasons* are given by the different sides in an effort to change the other’s mind.

Even when there is no other person around, philosophers will often think of and defend their own positions with a type of internal debate. They themselves take up a contrary position to their own view, make as good a case as possible for it, only to defeat it later. This is one of the reasons that you need to pay careful attention when reading philosophy. It is all too easy to mistake a passage where an author is explaining an objection to their position as an account of their own view. If you are not used to reading philosophy this can seem bizarre. Why would someone argue against their own view just to show that the argument they have given does not work? Of course, the point of debate is to convince other people. If you can correctly articulate your opponent’s reasons for disagreeing with you and then show that either there is a flaw in this reasoning or that it is insufficient to dislodge your claim, then you effectively undermine their position and support your own. So, considering objections—thinking about why others might disagree with you and what you can say in response—is crucial for the practice of philosophy.

This brings us to our third sense of argument. These are the parts of the argument in the debate sense. Here, Monty Python offers a definition that you might find in any introductory logic book: “An argument is a connected series of statements to establish a definite proposition.” Often philosophers will call the “connected series of statements” “premises,” though this is really just a fancy word for reasons, and the “definite proposition”, or “conclusion”, is established by the premises. (This use of the term “conclusion” can sometimes be a bit confusing as the same word is used to refer to the final section of an essay.) Philosophers often use this language of premises and conclusion, but it

is important not to let these technical terms intimidate you. A conclusion is just a controversial statement that you are trying to convince others to believe, and the premises are the reasons that you give for holding it. Sometimes it can be tricky to determine what the conclusion is, but often authors will use verbal signs, predicating their conclusion with “thus,” “therefore,” “hence,” or a phrase like “it follows that.” (You can find a list of these kinds of verbal signs on the [Tips for Reading Philosophy Actively](#) sheet.) It is important to note that some authors will have multiple conclusions and sub-arguments in their paper. Sometimes these nested arguments are needed to establish an even larger conclusion!

#### Summary of the 3 Senses of “Argument” from Monty Python’s Skit

1. **Yelling match**—mere contradiction
2. **Effective debate**—two or more parties arguing for opposing positions
3. **Philosophical argument**—a connected series of premises given to establish a conclusion

Another useful point we can find in Monty Python’s argument sketch is the distinction between an argument and a *good* argument. Of course, in the sketch, when one of the characters says, “I came here for a good argument,” he means something like he was expecting a debate that was interesting and fun. Because we are more interested in the third type of argument, we are going to think about good arguments as ones that are successful. That is, a good argument is one that would convince any rational person of the truth of the conclusion—the premises of a *good* argument really do establish the conclusion.

## 4.1. How to Evaluate Philosophical Arguments

Now, it is all very well to say this, but we still need more guidance as to how to assess arguments. Again, there is a huge and diverse global literature on this very topic. Nonetheless, most of it can be summarized (albeit superficially) in a neat heuristic offered by Canadian philosopher, Trudy Govier. She suggests that we evaluate arguments by posing three different questions about the premises and their relation to the conclusion, which she calls the **ARG conditions**: **A**, are the premises true or at least **acceptable**? **R**, are the premises **relevant** to the conclusion? **G**, do the premises provide **good grounds** for accepting the conclusion?<sup>1</sup>

The first condition—A, the truth or acceptability of the premises—is pretty easy to understand. If the reasons that someone gives for believing a particular conclusion are *false*, then you don’t have any reason for accepting that conclusion. Ideally, we would be certain that each premise is true, but this ends up being a difficult standard to maintain. After all, even very well verified and widely accepted claims in the sciences—for instance, that cigarette smoking causes cancer—might just be false. (This is not a flaw of science; it is a side effect of the inductive method that is characteristic of scientific research.) It is *possible*, albeit extraordinarily unlikely, that every study of the issue had some unrecognized fatal flaw and that the well-evidenced correlation between cigarette smoking and cancer is the result of some other factor(s), that are correlated with cigarette smoking that actually cause cancer. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to accept the claim that cigarette smoking causes cancer even if we don’t have absolute certainty. Indeed, if we are not willing to accept claims like this, we will find it difficult to make any ethical decisions at all (or, indeed, any other kind of decision).

At the same time, we do want to avoid uncritically accepting everything that someone says to defend their position.



Thus, it is important to reflect on why a premise is acceptable and to sincerely question whether, in fact, more information is needed before a rational evaluation of the premises can be made.

The second condition—R, the relevance of the premises—is a bit trickier. It may seem obvious that for a premise to establish a conclusion it must be relevant, but in fact, people quite often will use irrelevant facts to try to convince others to think or do something. There are many different ways of distracting people from carefully thinking through the matter at hand and irrelevant premises tend to do this. One of our favorite examples is a false equivalency that is used in an antacid commercial from the 1990s.



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We can reconstruct the argument offered by the commercial as something like this:

**Premise 1.** If we dip a rose in acid the acid will eat away the rose.

**Premise 2.** But if we coat the rose in Pepto Bismol before dipping it in acid the acid will not eat away the rose.

**Conclusion.** Therefore, if you have acid indigestion you should 'coat' your stomach with Pepto Bismol.

Of course, a rose is nothing like the human stomach. On the face of it, the fact that the rose is protected by Pepto Bismol is just not relevant to whether it will help with acid indigestion. Minimally, we need some additional reason to think that it is acceptable to “think of this rose as your stomach,” as the commercial suggests. That means that for this argument to work you would need to add some reason (or reasons) for thinking that roses and human stomachs are relevantly similar.

The third condition—G, whether the premises provide good grounds for accepting the conclusion—is the most general as it includes the other two conditions. After all, premises that aren't true and premises that aren't relevant cannot provide good grounds for accepting a conclusion. Indeed, you may think that if all the premises are true (or at least acceptable) and relevant then they must provide good grounds for accepting the conclusion. This, however, is not the case.

Consider a friend who urges you to try taking a herbal remedy the next time you get a cold. The reason they give is that they have started taking it when they get a cold and it works for them. It may well be true that it works for them and it's certainly relevant to the broader question of whether one should try the remedy oneself, but is it good enough grounds for doing so?

You might ask your friend how they came across this remedy. In effect, what you would be doing here is seeing if there are better reasons for taking the remedy. Suppose they say some dude at the farmer's market was selling it and swore by it as the best cold remedy he had ever tried. Do you have better grounds for thinking it will work? On one hand, you now know that there are at least two people who say it works, but on the other hand, you know that one of them has a vested interest as he is selling it. Suppose, instead, that your friend cites a meta-analysis of 20 randomized control trials showing the efficacy of the remedy for various cold viruses and across various population groups. Now, clearly, that's

much better grounds for thinking that the remedy will work for you than simply the testimony of either your friend or the dude at the farmer's market.

When it comes to some applied ethics contexts, we will find that what constitutes good enough grounds depends on the seriousness of a situation and the risks involved should we make a bad choice. With the question of whether you should take the herbal remedy at your friend's urging, the stakes are pretty low. After all, they're still alive, so you can infer that it's likely not poisonous. The worst thing that is likely to happen is that it just won't make any difference to your cold symptoms, and you'll be out a few dollars. But suppose instead that you are a health officer in charge of coordinating a response to a global pandemic in your local area and the president of the United States claims that a particular drug (in which they have a financial interest) has worked for them and can significantly reduce the mortality of those infected with the illness. Does this constitute good grounds for spending a considerable portion of your region's budget on this remedy? Here the stakes are higher. The illness is considerably more dangerous; the decision affects many more people than just you; you are in a position of public trust; it's your job to make these kinds of decisions well; millions of dollars will be diverted from other priorities and treatments for the pandemic should you buy the drug; and so on. When the stakes are high it is reasonable to expect people to have *very* good grounds for their conclusions and their decisions.

## Notes

1. Trudy Govier, *A Practical Study of Argument, Enhanced Edition* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 87-103.

## 5. How to Engage in Productive Debates

In ethics (and other areas of philosophy), debate has an important role in facilitating the exchange of ideas and providing opportunities for us to learn from each other. However, it is easy to get caught up in the ‘battle’ of argumentation. After all, the first two meanings of the word ‘argument,’ discussed above, suggest an antagonistic approach where two (or more) interlocutors take opposing sides on an issue and fight it out. It is especially easy to fall into an adversarial attitude in *ethics* where we may have strong feelings about right and wrong or commitments to particular values and our reasoning may lead us to act in ways with significant and perhaps irreversible consequences. In such contexts, it is tempting to try to defend one’s own views at all costs. Indeed, the adversarial process itself can become increasingly emotionally charged, inhibiting our ability to think rationally or listen to the perspectives of others. A focus on winning can distract us from attending to what makes an argument *good*—having premises that are true (or, at least, acceptable), relevant, and good grounds for the conclusion we seek to defend.

In order to stimulate productive and constructive discussion, there are a couple of things that we can do. First, when critiquing someone’s position, we should try to find all the points of agreement. This process will help to narrow down exactly where the interlocutors disagree and focus the discussion. Many debates make little progress because people are talking past each other; conflicts cannot be resolved because the interlocutors are not arguing about the same thing! (The abortion debate is a good example. Some philosophers have suggested that debates about the moral permissibility of abortion stall because “pro-choice” advocates focus on the moral status of the mother, whereas “pro-life” advocates focus on the moral status of the fetus.<sup>1</sup>)

Second, instead of trying to win the debate, consider engaging in argument repair.<sup>2</sup> This is where you actually help your interlocutor make the best case possible for their position. Argument repair can be achieved by making assumptions explicit, clarifying ambiguous terms, adding missing premises, or showing why the reasons given might be thought to provide good grounds for accepting the conclusion. In our everyday conversations, we typically don’t state all of the premises needed to give a complete defence of our arguments because we share common background knowledge and assumptions with our interlocutors. However, in more complex contexts (such as in ethical disputes), there is often one (or more) unstated premise that isn’t shared by all parties or the argument hinges on an important term that each defines in a subtly different way. (We touched on this in the discussion of disagreement in section 1.3, above.) In these cases, engaging in argument repair can make the debate more productive for everyone by redirecting debate away from an adversarial process to a more collaborative one that is aimed at mutual understanding and a resolution to the dispute that everyone can accept.

Of course, it is important not to misrepresent the argument when we are trying to repair it, which is easy to do if we disagree. Moreover, for argument repair to be successful, the person who originally made the argument must be open to revising their position and their interlocutor must allow them an opportunity to do so. Amendments made are only justified if they make the argument stronger. Added premises must be relevant (it’s remarkably easy to get carried away and add irrelevant premises) and provide good grounds for accepting the conclusion. Moreover, changes must be acceptable to all parties in the debate.

Engaging in respectful, good faith dialogue with each other helps us to make our own arguments stronger and recognize where our own reasoning is lacking or our judgements are wrong. Even when it does not bring agreement, efforts at argument repair may bring insight and mutual understanding, making debates more productive and moving us towards decisions that everyone can live with.

## Notes

1. Shannon Dea has an interesting article that takes an argument repair approach by suggesting harm reduction as a common value shared by pro-life and pro-choice advocates and then seeing what follows: [https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/11165/Stettner\\_2016-Without\\_Apology.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#page=327](https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/11165/Stettner_2016-Without_Apology.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#page=327).
2. See Catherine Hundleby for more discussion on argument repair: <https://chundleby.com/2015/01/16/what-is-argument-repair>.

## 6. Public Reasons

Because applied ethics often addresses issues that affect large groups of people this constrains what kinds of reasons and ethical theories are appropriate. We need to stand on ethical common ground if our arguments and judgements are to be seen as reasonable by others. There are certain theories that, although important in the history of ethics, will not prove fruitful in applied ethics contexts in a pluralist or secular society. These are ethical claims and theories that are based on a commitment to a religion. Obviously, some people have deeply held religious convictions and find the laws or principles of their religion a crucial guide for their moral lives. Nonetheless, although such commitments may provide compelling reasons for a practitioner of a given religion, they provide no reason at all for a non-practitioner or someone who is equally strongly committed to an entirely different religion. This is a crucial point because it means that a religious practitioner cannot *justify* their moral claims or decisions to a non-practitioner, so long as they rest on their religious commitment. Thus, although it may be acceptable to make ethical decisions concerning your own life on the basis of your religious convictions, it is unreasonable to expect others to accept the imposition of ethical prescriptions on them that are based on your (or anyone else's) religion.

A religious practitioner might reasonably object that they believe that their religion *does* in fact offer the best guidance for right action, which is why other people should follow their ethical prescriptions. Of course, this is possible. After all, there are many different religions and many more sects within them and at least some, if not most, of them will have important insights into moral life. The problem is that there is no obvious way to determine *which* religion is the right one and thus which specific ethical rules one should follow.

Mozi, a Chinese philosopher who lived over 2000 years ago (ca. 480-392? BCE),<sup>1</sup> made a similar point. He argued that it is important that people not simply follow conventional views and practices—the kinds of practices that people often unthinkingly follow because they were taught them as children—as these practices might not be morally right. Moreover, because people come from different cultures with different practices, simply following these conventions, particularly in contexts of ethical conflict, inevitably leads to social discord and, in some cases, war. Mozi recognized that accepting a kind of cultural relativism where right and wrong are simply determined by cultural convention isn't a viable option when people from many different cultures have to live together. Instead, Mozi argued for objective moral standards that everyone should follow.<sup>2</sup>

While Mozi was not an advocate for the kind of general freedom that characterizes contemporary democratic societies, his insights about needing shared ethical standards are still pertinent. This is why applied ethics typically deals with public reason. The idea of public reason is that the ethical rules in our common life must be acceptable or at least justifiable to everyone who is expected to live by them. This means that reasons given in applied ethics contexts should rest on ideas and theories that are not parochial. As we will see when we look at the moral theories below, values like rationality, happiness, and freedom are the kinds of ideas that have the sort of broad appeal that is characteristic of public reason.

Though not strictly necessary, there is a certain sense of fairness implicit in the idea of public reasons. All things being equal, we are all expected to follow the same rules. If there is to be differential treatment, there must be a good reason for it. Indeed, this is really a point about rationality as well as fairness. Like should be treated alike. In ethical contexts, this ideal is called formal justice. It is a part of a broader rational norm of consistency.

To summarize, ethics requires us to do more than simply follow our knee-jerk reactions, our emotional responses, or conventional norms when deciding what to do. It is not that they are irrelevant. They can alert us to moral issues and important aspects of a tricky moral dilemma. However, they can also mislead. Moral reasoning requires not only an assessment of the moral issues with a sensitivity to competing analyses but that we have good reasons for what we ultimately decide. We need to commit to shared standards of rational argumentation and constructive debate if we are

to defend our judgements and hold each other accountable for our actions. The ethical theories addressed below help to provide the normative content of these reasons.

## Notes

1. JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 108.
2. Chris Fraser, "Mohism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Fall 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/mohism/>, §3.

## PART III

# ETHICAL LENSES

As mentioned above, there are a many, many different moral theories. As you confront particular moral problems or study applied ethics subdisciplines you will find that digging deeper into these theories is a crucial part of developing your applied ethics tools. Nonetheless, at the introductory level we can identify four fundamentally different approaches to moral reasoning that cover the essential ideas of many of these theories:

1. [Consequentialism](#);
2. [Deontology](#);
3. [Virtue ethics](#);
4. [Relational ethics](#).

These are robust ethical orientations that are woven throughout various global ethical theories and traditions. As noted above, we are going to think of them as lenses that can be brought to the ethical question, what should I (or we) do? Briefly, consequentialism answers the question by considering the consequences of the possible actions presented to one and whether they are good or bad. Deontology answers by looking at the action itself as well as the thought that motivates the action and whether they are right or wrong. Virtue ethics answers by looking to one's character and identifying what the virtuous person would do. Relational ethics affirms the importance of relationships of various different kinds and looks at how these relationships inform and constrain what one can and should do. In the next four subsections, we will look at each of these approaches in more detail.

Even as the four lenses offer a comprehensive set of approaches to thinking through ethical problems and issues, some moral concepts defy neat inclusion under one or another lens. We will discuss two important and influential examples—*ahimsa* and *rights*—in the next chapter ([4.12](#) and [4.13](#), respectively). As you read about the different lenses (and, indeed, the concepts of rights and ahimsa) you will notice that some of the theories offer different views about who or what should be considered when we make ethical decisions. This is captured by the idea of *moral status* (also sometimes called *moral standing* or *moral considerability*). Some theorists treat moral status as a matter of degree, maintaining that some beings have full moral status and their interests should count more in our ethical decision-making, while others still count but to a lesser degree. Other theorists treat moral status as an all-or-nothing kind of issue. What grounds moral status is contentious, so we will return to it below as we survey the lenses and develop a sense of the ways in which questions about moral status arise.

# 7. Consequentialism

The first approach to ethical decision-making that we are going to consider is *consequentialism*. This approach focuses on the consequences of the actions that we are considering and whether they are good or bad. As we shall see, consequentialists can have very different views of what counts as good or bad consequences. Also, they may think about consequences in quite different ways, with some focusing first on individuals and other more interested in the group. They also differ in how they factor moral status into decision-making; that is, figuring out who counts. Some consequentialists consider humans alone while others extend their ethical gaze to nonhuman animals also.

## 7.1. Mohism

Written consequentialist theories go back to the work of Mozi (mentioned above in [2.6](#)) and those who followed his work, the Mohists. This philosophical approach saw its zenith during the Warring States era in China (479–221 BCE), a time of political chaos that brought considerable misery and hardship to ordinary people.<sup>1</sup> The right thing to do, according to the Mohists, is simply to try to alleviate harms done to people and promote what is beneficial to them. Mozi wrote:

Now at the present time, what brings the greatest harm to the world? Great states attacking small ones, great families overthrowing small ones, the strong oppressing the weak, the many harrying the few, the cunning deceiving the stupid, the eminent lording it over the humble—these are harmful to the world.<sup>2</sup>

Mozi thought that the underlying cause of this misery is that people are partial, meaning that they don't love everyone equally but instead put the interests of particular people—typically, themselves and their loved ones—before everyone else. In the dominant approach to ethics in China at the time, love of one's family, especially one's parents (sometimes called *filial piety*) played a central role. Mozi argued that if one really wants to benefit and protect the interests of one's parents, the best way to achieve this is to make sure that everyone else wants it too. The question is how does one secure this goal? He explains, "Obviously, I must make it a point to love and benefit other [people's] parents, so that they in return will love and benefit my parents. So, if all of us are to be filial [children], can we set about it any other way than by first making a point of loving and benefiting other [people's] parents?"<sup>3</sup>

Mozi's point is that everyone will be better off if we all follow a practice of universal, impartial love. It's worth noting here that Mozi is not saying that universal love is intrinsically good. It is, instead, a means for bringing about the good. As he explains:

Now if we seek to benefit the world by taking universality as our standard, those with sharp ears and clear eyes will see and hear for others, those with sturdy limbs will work for others...Those who are old and without [family] will find means of support and be able to live out their days; the young and orphaned who have no parents will find someone to care for them and look after their needs.<sup>4</sup>

This passage suggests the benefits that Mohists sought to advance—namely, life, wealth, and social order—and the harms they wished to avoid—namely, death, poverty, and disorder or conflict.<sup>5</sup> Although we might disagree about the goals that Mohists value, the important point here is that in order to assess what we should do they direct us to look at the consequences. They believe that we should make decisions about what to do based on how our actions will affect society as a whole.



## 7.2. Utilitarianism

In the 18th century an English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, came up with a similar idea, which he dubbed “Utilitarianism.” Bentham was scientifically minded, which one can see in the way he approached ethics. He noticed that we all pursue pleasure and avoid pain. This provided him with what he called a *principle of utility*, which is, in effect, a theory of the good. In brief, Bentham thought it is good to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.<sup>6</sup>

He suggested we should do a kind of calculus when we are trying to figure out what will maximize utility. We should identify the likely outcomes of different possible actions, consider who is affected by those actions and consider the intensity, duration, and immediacy of the pleasures and pains that would be produced by for each individual as well as the degree of certainty we have that they would be brought about.<sup>7</sup> As with Mohism, everyone counts equally. We are not allowed to weigh our own pleasures and pains more heavily in this calculation.

While this view is often identified with the slogan ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’, this isn’t quite right. It is possible that one could achieve ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’ by inflicting abject misery on a few. This might add up to less utility than a situation where there is rather less good outcomes for slightly fewer people that ensured abject misery for none. In other words, the utilitarian calculus needs to take into consideration negative utility (for Bentham, pain) as well as positive utility (for Bentham, pleasure).

Later thinkers have modified utilitarianism in various ways. Some have suggested that the principle of utility needed revision, suggesting that happiness and suffering are much richer and more morally nuanced ideas than mere pleasure and pain. This was the view of John Stewart Mill, another English thinker, who developed and refined Bentham’s theory. Mill thought that many of the experiences that individuals value the most aren’t those that simply bring them pleasure. Moreover, he thought that even among pleasurable experiences we might want to differentially rank pleasures. He famously wrote, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question.”<sup>8</sup> It is not clear that Bentham would have agreed with this. He extended his theory to all sentient beings, remarking, “the question is not, *Can they reason?* or *Can they talk?* but *Can they suffer?*”<sup>9</sup>

Some utilitarians have suggested that we need to consider something more easily countable than pleasures, pains, happiness, and suffering and so use preference satisfaction as the principle of utility. Due to the tendency for humans to have wholly irrational preferences—for instance, frequently choosing to do things that harm them— other thinkers have suggested that we define utility in terms of the preferences that humans would have if we were perfectly rational beings. One can often see something like this approach in economics and rational decision theory.

Harm/benefit analyses invariably take up a kind of consequentialist lens. After all, harms are typically nothing other than bad consequences and benefits are typically good consequences. The challenge with harm/benefit analyses, just as with consequentialism more generally, is figuring out what counts—pleasure, happiness, preferences, social order, life, wealth—who counts—only humans or some nonhuman animals too—and how to weigh what are often very different kinds of consequences against each other.

### 7.2.1. Act Utilitarianism

While all utilitarians value consequences, they may differ in how they do this. One option is to employ a utilitarian calculus for each action. This approach, *Act Utilitarianism*, provides us with the following principle, quoting Boetzkes and Waluchow:

An act is right if and only if there is no other action I could have done instead which either (a) would have produced a greater balance of utility over disutility; or (b) would have produced a smaller balance of disutility over utility.<sup>10</sup>

This is all a bit abstract, so it is useful to try it out in some imaginary scenarios.

Suppose you have the choice of three different actions (A, B, and C) and you reasonably believe that whichever you do will affect three different people (Xena, Yasaar, and Zhu). You take into consideration the intensity, duration, immediacy and degree of certainty of the positive and negative consequences of each possible action for each individual. On the basis of your principle of utility, you assign utility values to each person given each possible action. Then you just do the math. In the table below we can see that action C is the right thing to do, according to act utilitarianism.

<b>Action</b>	<b>Xena's utility</b>	<b>Yasaar's utility</b>	<b>Zhu's utility</b>	<b>Utility of the action</b>
<b>A</b>	-10	+3	+5	-2
<b>B</b>	-3	+2	+3	+2
<b>C</b>	+10	-2	-4	+4

Notice that even though action C makes two of three people worse off than any other possible action it is still the right thing to do because their additive disutility is considerably less than the positive utility of the third person. This *could* even be true if there were another possible action that had positive utility for everyone. (Suppose there were a fourth possible action, D that had a value of +1 for each person. This would still only add up to +3 and thus provide less total utility than action C in this scenario.)

We can make this a little more tangible still. Imagine you're Yassar and you own an apartment that you are currently renting to Xena. Xena lost her job a few months ago and, even with government assistance, she is now two months behind on rent. She is looking for a job but you don't expect she will be able to find one. Zhu is looking for an apartment and would like to rent the apartment that Xena currently occupies. You consider things and judge that you have three options: (A) you could evict Xena immediately and immediately rent the apartment to Zhu; (B) you could give Xena until the end of the month to find the money to pay her back rent and then evict her and rent it to Zhu if she fails (as I expect she will); and (C) you can just tell Xena that you are confident she will be able to pay her back rent eventually and tell Zhu that they will have to find another apartment.

Notice that even though it's the worst option for you (Yassar), action C is still the right thing to do. Even if Zhou was your best friend and Xena was the biggest jerk you'd ever met, if the calculus above is correct, option C is the right thing to do. Again, for utilitarians all individuals count equally and all that matters is the total utility produced, whether we judge that in terms of pleasures (and pains), happiness (and suffering) or preferences. Also, notice how sensitive the consequences are to the situation of the individuals involved. It is easy to imagine all kinds of different circumstances that would influence the utility of each action for each individual, from whether Xena has other realistic living options, to Yassar's wealth, to Zhu's psychological capacity to deal with uncertainty (each of these considerations could change the utility value assigned to each individual).

STOP & THINK

**Are there any moral considerations in this situation that aren't captured if we just think about the consequences?**

What are they?

There are several objections that people have raised to act utilitarianism. First, many people think that there are particular types of action or special relationships that matter, which are irrelevant from a utilitarian perspective. (We'll consider these ethical lenses in sections 3.8 and 3.10.1, respectively.) For instance, suppose I have already promised the apartment to Zhou when I'm trying to decide what to do. An act utilitarian will only value keeping this promise insofar as it affects the utility of the possible actions. To be sure, often breaking promises can cause the promise-breaker shame, anguish and anxiety (disutility, on pretty much any principle of utility) and have real negative consequences for the person to whom the promise was made. However, if I have no scruples about breaking promises and Zhou's disutility isn't increased by the additional harm of having a promise broken, then the fact a promise was made is irrelevant to what the right thing to do is for an act utilitarian. If we think that promises matter morally then this appears to be a serious problem for this theory. Similarly, we may think that we have particular obligations to family and friends to watch out for their interests and that these cannot fully be captured simply by thinking about consequences in a totally impartial way.

Another type of objection concerns matters of *justice*. Imagine the following scenario. Suppose you are a police superintendent in a town where a terrible violent crime has been committed and the perpetrator is still at large. The general populace of the community is not only terrified, but they are also very angry at what they consider to be the failure of the police and there are nightly protests that are getting increasingly violent. Although you have no leads, you do a utilitarian calculus where you consider framing one person for the crime. You reason as follows. If no arrest is made thousands of people will suffer in the following ways: many people will continue to live in terror; the riots will continue and many people will be hurt, some even killed; many people's property will be damaged and some of their livelihoods ruined. If I frame a person who has no alibi, then these terrible consequences will be avoided. To be sure, one person will suffer terribly, but this is outweighed by the thousands of people who will be spared any disutility. If the numbers work out, this means that the right thing to do is to frame the innocent person. Also, notice that if I want to harm as few people as possible then I will target someone who is socially isolated and marginalized in the community, someone who likely already experiences significant forms of social injustice. Most people think this is clearly wrong. It is simply unjust to frame an innocent person and even worse if you choose them because they are oppressed. If you are not so sure, imagine that you are the innocent person who is framed—after all, utilitarianism is impartial.

Act utilitarianism faces another kind of challenge when we consider the *problem of free riders*. Imagine there is a water shortage in your town. The town council asks everyone to avoid watering their lawns (if they have them) and to take short showers only a few times a week. If most people do this, a catastrophic drought where there is not enough water to drink will be avoided. So, although everyone will experience some unpleasantness if they follow the council's recommendation, it is considerably less unpleasant than what would happen under drought conditions. Suppose you know that your neighbours are very civic-minded and are likely to comply with the order, which means there will be more than enough water saved to avoid the catastrophic drought. Then it doesn't really matter what you do, as the drought will be avoided. Indeed, because you will diminish your own utility by forgoing your two daily 20 minute showers (you don't have a lawn) and because the right thing to do is to maximize utility, it seems you are morally obliged to keep up your high consumption of water, according to act utilitarianism. If people were to find out that you're a free rider this might make them angry (an unpleasant emotion that diminishes their happiness), so to maximize the overall utility you might be required to cover up and lie about your own water consumption. It seems, once again, that an act utilitarian approach is requiring one to behave in ways that are fundamentally unfair and immoral. Notice that this is not

the same as the *tragedy of the commons* because we are imagining that not everyone is acting in their own self-interest and attempting to free ride. In other words, it's only the right thing to do, from an act utilitarian perspective, because there is only one person doing it.

### 7.2.2. Rule Utilitarianism

Prompted by such concerns, some have proposed a rule-based approach to utilitarianism, *Rule Utilitarianism*. The basic idea is that we need to identify those rules that, if everybody followed them, would maximize utility. Thus, we get a principle like the following (quoting Boetzkes and Waluchow):

An act is morally right if and only if it conforms with a set of rules whose general observance would maximize utility.<sup>11</sup>

At least initially, this version of utilitarianism seems able to address all three of the challenges to Act Utilitarianism outlined above. Obviously, it deals with the free rider problem, but it also seems to deal with the scenario where an innocent person is framed for a crime. After all, if law enforcement frequently framed innocent people they would produce considerable disutility, terrorizing the innocent and ignoring real criminals, letting crime escalate. Even special relationships seem to be saved. For instance, if every parent followed the rule that parents should take special care of their children this would probably maximize utility.

However, some critics have complained that Rule Utilitarianism gives up much of what was really useful about the consequentialist perspective. Consequentialism allows us to consider all the nuances and details of a particular situation. When we use the same set of rules to apply to a wide variety of situations, we may lose some valuable flexibility. Moreover, it becomes difficult to articulate when we should break a rule in order to maximize utility. The theory flirts with absurdity as soon as one tries to articulate rules for when to break rules in order to maximize utility.

## 7.3. Final Considerations about Consequentialism

While there are significant similarities between Mozi's consequentialism and utilitarianism there are also some differences. Perhaps the most significant similarity, beyond consequentialism itself, is that they both emphasize impartiality—that one shouldn't value one's own well-being (or that of those close to us) more than anybody else's. This means that Mozi's consequentialism and utilitarianism suggest that everyone who counts enjoys equal moral status. The key difference is in what these theories value and how they think of the collective. Utilitarians think of the collective simply as the sum of individuals; you determine utility for each person and then add it all up. Mozi values wealth, social order, and community growth as properties of the collective. Consider social order. This is not the property of an individual and so it is not a possible principle of utility. Mozi can directly value social order in his system because the consequences he wants to bring about are the good of society as a whole, not the good of society understood as a collection of individuals.

STOP & THINK

**What are the different strengths and weaknesses of the different theories that employ a consequentialist lens?**

Do you think one is better than the others?

## Notes

1. Chris Fraser, "Mohism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Fall 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/mohism/>.
2. Mozi, quoted in JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 110-1.
3. Mozi, 114.
4. Mozi, 116.
5. Fraser, "Mohism," §7.
6. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, edited by Jonathan Bennett (Early Modern Texts, 2017), 6, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/bentham1780.pdf>.
7. Bentham, 22-3.
8. John Stuart Mill, *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Utilitarianism*, 2004, chapter 2, para. 6, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11224/11224-h/11224-h.htm>.
9. Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 144.
10. Elisabeth Boetzkes and Wilfrid Waluchow, *Readings in Health Care Ethics* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 12-3.
11. Boetzkes and Waluchow, 16.

## 8. Deontology

The next approach to ethical decision-making that we are going to consider is deontology or duty ethics. With this approach, we focus on the actions themselves and consider whether they are right or wrong. The idea is that we have certain duties, things that we should do, whether because of a prior commitment, our social role, or simply because they are the right things to do. The rightness of an action is determined by the kind of action it is and the motive behind it.

People often contrast deontology with consequentialism. Deontology emphasizes the intrinsic rightness of an action regardless of any consequences, while consequentialism favours bringing about the best ends regardless of the actions required to do so. Realistically, this is a bit of an oversimplification, but this kind of cartoon can help one get a grip on the basic idea before adding more nuance.

Many people think that both approaches are valuable. Consistent with the ethical lens idea, applied ethicists often articulate basic principles at least one of which is deontological and another of which is consequentialist. For instance, research ethics often demands that researchers treat their participants/subjects with respect—a deontological commitment—and also requires that researchers care for the welfare of their participants/subjects—a consequentialist commitment. Because these are fundamentally different ethical orientations, they can conflict. When they do, this is often a sign that an ethical issue is particularly challenging.

One of the tricky things about duties is figuring out how we acquire them and who has which duties. As noted, there are different deontological approaches identifying different sources of our duties. Although the three approaches are not meant to be exhaustive, they capture common ways of thinking about duties.

### 8.1. Duties Based on Roles

Perhaps the easiest to understand is the idea that specific social roles come with particular duties. The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the central texts of the Hindu tradition, touches on this approach to duty. (The *Gita* certainly does much more than this—it is one of the great texts of world literature and broaches multiple fundamental philosophical issues. Here, we merely brush the surface of one of the many important themes in this text.) The *Gita* recounts the story and moral struggles of Arjuna, a prince and hero who must fight a war against his cousins. Arjuna is full of doubt and grief at the idea of killing his kin and the destruction of war more generally but is nonetheless bound by his duty as a warrior and the justness of his cause to take up arms. He asks his charioteer, who is an avatar of the god Krishna, what he should do.

Here we can see Arjuna struggling with two competing duties based on kinds of social roles. First, there is the duty not to kill his kin, the duty he has as a family member. Second, there is his duty as a prince and warrior to save his people from the unjust rule of his cousins. Horrified by the thought of killing so many, particularly friends and family, Arjuna resolves not to fight. Krishna admonishes Arjuna and urges him to change his mind. Among the various arguments that Krishna offers, the one that interests us has to do with Arjuna's social role. Krishna points out that for a warrior there is no higher purpose than a just war. For a warrior, to refuse to fight is to abandon one's duty.<sup>1</sup> The role of warrior has within it a duty to fight for the righteous; it is simply tied up with the role.

The idea that specific duties come with specific professions is especially powerful for applied ethics contexts. For instance, a physician has particular duties concerning protecting and promoting the health of their patients and an engineer has particular duties to produce designs that fulfill their functions.

## STOP & THINK

What is your ideal job?

**Are there particular duties that someone in that profession has because of the nature of the profession?**

(Note, not all professions or social roles have these kinds of particular duties so it's important to notice which ones do.)

Many professions come with *fiduciary obligations*. These are duties that come from particular relations of trust constraining how a professional can act on behalf of their client. For instance, lawyers have fiduciary obligations to their clients to act in their clients' interests and as directed by their clients. The specifics of these fiduciary duties are determined by law and professional societies. For instance, lawyers failing in their fiduciary obligations may be disbarred by the relevant law society. Although some professional fiduciary obligations are enshrined in law, others are more nebulous. The key idea for us is that certain kinds of professions or social roles come with duties that are particular to those roles.

## 8.2. Duties Based on Past Actions

Another approach to deontology recognizes that some of our current duties rest on our past actions and the past actions of others. W.D. Ross, a twentieth century English thinker, thought that we have many different types of duty, an important subset of which are backward looking. Consequentialism is limited, Ross thought, because it only concerns itself with the future, not acknowledging the important role of the past in determining what we should do. For instance, Ross suggests that we acquire particular duties when we make promises. As a tangible example, at this moment, Letitia doesn't have a duty to pick up Clarisse at the airport. However, if Letitia had promised Clarisse that she would do so, then she would have acquired the duty to pick up Clarisse at the airport and, concomitantly, the duty to keep her promise. Letitia is doing something wrong if she doesn't do as she promised. The same action—not picking up Clarisse—would not count as a wrong if Letitia never made the promise.

We can also acquire duties from committing harms. Suppose Letitia had promised to pick up Clarisse at the airport and failed to do so. We might think that Letitia has, at the very least, a duty to apologize. If Letitia's negligence led to significant harm—maybe Clarisse had to spend the night at the airport—Letitia acquires a duty to try to ameliorate the harm or correct it. Similarly, if Letitia frequently picks up Clarisse from the airport, we might think that Clarisse acquires a duty too. We would expect her to show gratitude and perhaps reciprocate in some way.

Ross identified three types of duty that come from past actions that fit the duties described in the above scenarios. One type of duty is *duties of fidelity*, which are in effect duties to be trustworthy and keep our promises. *Duties of reparation* are another type of duty. These come into effect when we have harmed or wronged someone. They are duties to repair a situation or otherwise make amends. Finally, Ross also mentions *duties of gratitude*. These arise when others help or support us. We acquire through their actions, a duty to reciprocate or, at least, be grateful for their benefiting us.<sup>2</sup> Ross did not suggest that these duties exhaust all the possible types of duty. Indeed, he also suggested we have

forward-looking duties of *non-maleficence* (not harming others), *beneficence* (improving the well-being of others), *self-improvement*, and *justice*.

Another useful idea Ross offers is that duties are often *prima facie*. *Prima facie* simply means “at first glance.” The idea of *prima facie duties*, then, is that each duty is required *unless* there is some other competing duty that outweighs it in moral force.<sup>3</sup> It’s easy to see—when we consider Ross’s list of duties—why he needs an idea like this. After all, there are many situations where these duties may compete. Think back to the scenario with Xena, Yassar, and Zhou and put yourself in Xena’s shoes. On the one hand, Xena has the duty of fidelity, which means she should keep the promise to pay her rent, which is likely explicit in her lease (but would be implicit in renting even without a lease). On the other hand, we may think that her duty to protect her own interests, personal security, and well-being, implied by the duty of self-improvement, means she should try to convince Yassar to let her stay in the apartment, even if she can’t pay her rent.

How is one to decide between competing duties? Ross, unfortunately, offers little help on this matter. However, if we treat ethical theories as lenses that help us appreciate the moral contours of ethical life, we might find that other ethical theories can help us weigh these various duties.

### 8.3. Duties Based on Reason Alone—Categorical Imperatives

One particularly influential deontological approach was first articulated by the 18th-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant believed that we could figure out what our duties are on the basis of reason alone. He called such duties *categorical imperatives*.

A categorical imperative is a fundamental principle of human choice and action. Kant thought that these fundamental moral principles were, in effect, rules hard-wired into our rational minds that we can discover and make explicit to ourselves to better guide our actions. Categorical imperatives can be understood as intrinsic moral duties that we have an obligation to fulfill, irrespective of any desires or goals we might have.

In reality, there may be instances where we do what appears to be the morally right thing but only because it will benefit ourselves. For example, consider a millionaire who decides to donate a proportion of their wealth to charity but only in order to get a tax break. While this seems like a moral action because it benefits a worthy cause, Kant would argue that the action was immoral because it was motivated by the wrong reasons. The millionaire’s goal was to get a tax break. They acted for selfish reasons. For Kant, even though the action brought about good consequences, the act itself was immoral because the millionaire was putting their interests ahead of others, in effect behaving as if they had more value or worth than everyone else. To act in accord with a categorical imperative, one must act the right way for the right reasons. It is not justified on the basis that it will achieve some desirable consequence. It is just something you must do. The consequences are irrelevant to determining right and wrong and the only goal that matters is to perform one’s moral duty.

The problem is, how do you justify categorical imperatives? Kant was impressed by the fact that humans are both free and rational. He thought that we can use our rational capacities to identify categorical imperatives and then freely choose to follow this moral law. So, he proposed a kind of rational test, commonly referred to as the *first formulation of the categorical imperative*. He suggested that when considering an action, we should articulate the *maxim* that describes that action—basically, the rule we would be following were we to act in this way.<sup>4</sup> Then we should ask ourselves, could we will that the maxim be a universal law, akin to a natural law (like universal gravitation or  $E=mc^2$ ). In other words, would we want everyone to always act according to this maxim? If not, we shouldn’t do it. Kant’s test (at least at its best) is a logical one. The question is about whether it is *logically* possible to will the maxim as a universal law.



Kant considers the following example:

Let the question be, for example: May I when in distress make a promise with the intention not to keep it? ...[T]o discover the answer to this question...[I] ask myself, “Should I be content that my maxim (to extricate myself from difficulty by a false promise) should hold good as a universal law, for myself as well as for others?” and should I be able to say to myself, “Every one may make a deceitful promise when he finds himself in a difficulty from which he cannot otherwise extricate himself?” Then I presently become aware that while I can will the lie, I can by no means will that lying should be a universal law. For with such a law there would be no promises at all, since it would be in vain to allege my intention in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this allegation, or if they over hastily did so would pay me back in my own coin. Hence my maxim, as soon as it should be made a universal law, would necessarily destroy itself.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, according to Kant, the wrongness of lying comes down to the idea that it is impossible to consistently will that everyone would lie when it would be to their advantage because it would create a world in which people who act on this maxim would never succeed in telling a lie. Lying only works because there is an expectation in society that people tell the truth. However, the lying example also fails Kant’s *second formulation of the categorical imperative*: we should never treat ourselves or others as merely a means to some end, but always treat others as ends in themselves. Before explaining this, it is important to understand why rationality was so important to morality in the Kantian tradition.

Kant believed that the ability to rationally decide and then freely act was characteristic of moral beings. This capacity for self-governance is called *autonomy*. Autonomous beings are capable of overcoming their inclinations and emotions. They are not simply driven by psychological or biological processes; they can choose to act on the basis of reason. Violating someone’s autonomy—treating them as if they are either not rational or not free—is one of the worst things you can do to an autonomous being.

Autonomy, thought Kant, gives beings special moral status—they are “ends in themselves.” This is a way of saying that autonomous beings have moral status not because of some other goal, consequence, or value. They have inherent moral worth. As such, Kant believed it is wrong to treat any free and rational being as a mere means to achieving some goal or end. Insofar as we are autonomous beings and we are moral equals, we must never value ourselves over anyone else. This idea, often called *respect for persons*, has been extremely important in philosophy in the European tradition and, arguably, grounds the idea of universal human rights (which we will return to in [4.13](#)). To return to Kant’s lying promise example, lying violates the other person’s autonomy because the other person cannot, with false information, make a rational decision for themselves. If I lie in order to further my own ends, I am treating the other person as a means to my own ends.

Despite the importance of Kant in the legal, political, and ethical traditions of Europe and European settler societies, there are some serious concerns with this approach. First, when it comes to the universal law test (the first formulation of the categorical imperative), it’s not entirely clear how to come up with the right maxim. Typically, any given action can be described in a variety of ways and so there are several different maxims that might be used to capture a given act. Suppose you are in the position of the person considering the *lying promise*, described above. However, the reason you are considering lying is because it is the only way you can get some money and, without this money, you will be unable to feed your children and they will starve. You might ask yourself, “Can I will as a universal law the following maxim? When someone’s child is threatened with death, they must do whatever it takes to save them.” It seems reasonable to think that you can will this as a universal maxim. So, which maxim is the right one to use when you are considering what you should do: the maxim that says to never lie and break a promise, or the one that says to lie only when you cannot feed your children?

Although the challenge of articulating the right action stands, Kant has a clear reply. Any time you lie or break a promise you are doing something wrong because you are failing to respect another person’s autonomy, which means that you fail to respect their inherent worth as a person. In the imagined scenario, when you lie to someone, even in order to save

your child, you are taking away that person's freedom to use their own rationality to think through what they should do and their own freedom to help you. If there is a good reason for you to get the money despite not having the capacity or intention to pay it back then, as a rational and free being, they are capable of recognising that too. If you lie to them, you are just treating them as a means to getting money and not an end in themselves.

## 8.4. Final Considerations about Deontology

While Kantian ethics has dominated discussions of deontology over the last few hundred years in societies that are shaped by the European tradition, it is worth remembering that the idea that we have basic duties is global and ancient. Whether duties are categorical, or are specific to social role, or acquired through previous actions, the view that some types of action are morally required and that the motivations behind actions matter ethically is common.

While both consequentialism and deontology are particularly adept at addressing moral problems when they arise, virtue ethics and relational ethics are more oriented to how to live life well or what makes a good life as a whole. It is to these rather different ways of approaching ethics that we now turn.

### Notes

1. Stephen Mitchell (translator), *Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 51-2.
2. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 21-2.
3. Ross, 18-36.
4. It is important to note that when you attempt to follow the first formulation of the categorical imperative, that you try to make the maxim as generalizable as possible. Often, students think that if they create a specific maxim, such as "Can I lie about how good my grandmother's haircut looks if she asks me this Friday?", then it is easy to pass Kant's test. However, this move loses sight of Kant's bigger picture: to identify universal moral principles that should guide any autonomous being to act because the action is intrinsically good.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Project Gutenberg, 2004), Kindle Loc. 283-300.

## 9. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics approaches focus on describing virtues (and vices) and explaining how to develop a virtuous character and live a good life. While acting in the right way and bringing about good consequences matter, developing a virtuous character is the central concern. The idea is that if one has the right kind of character, then one will, as a result of this, do the right things and good consequences will follow.

As with consequentialism and deontology, we can find versions of this approach in many different cultural traditions. Arguably, whenever someone tells a story about an exemplary human being with the clear implication that others ought to behave like this exemplar, they are engaged in a kind of virtue ethics. Although philosophers have different ways of identifying virtues and characterizing the good life, virtue approaches tend to have a set of things in common. They all recognize that developing a good character takes training and practice. The disposition to be good is, in effect, a habit of behaving well. Good habits are acquired by repetition, whether we repeat these actions mindfully or simply by inclination, just as bad habits are acquired by repeatedly behaving badly. Thus, many virtue ethicists emphasize the importance of education and having a social environment that supports the acquisition of virtue as well as discussing how those of us who want to be better people can shape our own characters.

### 9.1. The Good Life, According to Aristotle

The most famous virtue ethicist in the European tradition is Aristotle (384–322 BCE). His book, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, begins by identifying the good as that which people pursue for its own sake. While we can see that many people pursue things like pleasure and wealth, these are not the kinds of ultimate ends that Aristotle has in mind. After all, wealth is only an *instrumental good* as it merely provides a means for obtaining things that we hope will make us happy but does not provide happiness directly (or particularly reliably). Similarly, pleasure is often a sign of the good—particularly for virtuous people who take pleasure in acting virtuously—but it is not itself good. Aristotle believed that what we pursue is happiness and a happy life is the ultimate good that humans seek. Although we have used the term “happiness,” this isn’t a perfect translation. The Greek term Aristotle used is “*eudaemonia*,” which is variously translated as happiness, flourishing, and well-being. (The BBC has a nice little video about *eudaemonia* and Aristotle’s ethics, which you can view [here](#).)

It is important to understand that Aristotle is not just saying that if you follow the virtues, then you will experience happiness. (This is one of the reasons why many translators prefer the term “flourishing” as a translation of *eudaemonia*.) *Eudaemonia* is nothing other than living virtuously, functioning well as a human being over a continuous period of time by consistently doing the right thing. From *eudaemonia* positive and appropriate emotions flow. Emotional responses, like virtuous character traits, are acquired through habit and though they should not override reasons, Aristotle believed they had an important role in our moral lives.

Aristotle had a very particular account of the virtues, each one of which he thought was situated between two vices—one of excess and the other of deficiency. So, for instance, Aristotle thought that the virtue of courage is a middle way, between the vices of cowardice and recklessness. He has a long list of virtues with their attendant vices, and even with its length, there is little reason to think his list is exhaustive.

Although we may wonder if this account of virtue accurately captures the character of all virtues and vices, careful consideration of some cases shows its usefulness. One of the virtues Aristotle considers is *proper pride*, what we might think of as appropriate self-regard. Someone with proper pride thinks themselves worthy and is worthy; they make

claims to appropriate treatment by others in accord with their merits. Thus, Aristotle notes, pride is a kind of “crown of the virtues”<sup>1</sup> as one must have already achieved great things to properly feel it. This virtue sits between the excess of *vanity*, where one believes that they deserve more than they truly merit, and a vice of *false modesty* or inappropriate humility. Both of these vices reflect a failure to accurately appreciate one’s own merits. Such failures may lead one to act badly because one has over-estimated one’s capacities, in the case of the vanity, or fail to act at all, as in the case of the inappropriate humility.

Similarly, anger can be virtuous or vicious. Aristotle identifies the good-tempered person as someone “who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and further, as [they] ought, when [they] ought, and as long as [they] ought.”<sup>2</sup> This rests between the vices of being hot-tempered—where one easily angers, directs one’s anger at the wrong targets, or is sulky or vengeful—and a deficiency where one doesn’t care about anything at all or is willing to accept abuse of oneself or others.

The thing to notice in these examples is that there isn’t a rule that will tell you how to be courageous, how to have proper pride, or how to feel and express appropriate anger. Nor is there an ordering of virtues and vices that tells you which virtues are more important than others. Indeed, the appropriate action in any given situation is often particular to that situation. What we can say is that the virtuous person will act well no matter the situation and will, by so doing, flourish and live a successful, happy life.

## 9.2. The Good Life, According to Buddhism

A number of contemporary thinkers read Buddhist ethics as a type of virtue ethics. One of the complications here is that even if we concede that much of Buddhist ethics addresses the acquisition of virtuous ways of thinking and acting, it starts with a big dose of consequentialism. Like Aristotle’s ethics, Buddhist ethics begins with an observation about human lives. Indeed, this insight about the nature of life is Buddhism’s first noble truth: Suffering is an inescapable part of life. The Buddha is thought to have said:

...[B]irth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering...”<sup>3</sup>

Having recognized this, the aim of Buddhism is really about figuring out how to live so as to minimize suffering—clearly a consequentialist goal.

However, the guidance that Buddhism gives for achieving this goal focuses on the cultivation of ways of thinking and behaving that fit the model of virtue ethics. For instance, the second noble truth identifies the source of suffering as what are, in effect, vices. The central vice identified here is *attachment*. Attachment includes things like greed and lust but more generally refers to craving or desire for things. Along with attachment, ignorance and hatred constitute the ‘three poisons’ that tend to give rise to suffering. So, dispositions to dismiss or be indifferent to the truth, despise and harm others, or constantly acquire or desire more things are serious character flaws.

The third noble truth just makes the obvious point that you can decrease suffering by renouncing or rejecting what gives rise to it. In terms of the three poisons, instead of ignorance one should pursue wisdom, instead of hatred one should cultivate loving kindness, and instead of attachment, one should practice a selflessness and generosity.

The fourth noble truth further specifies the practices that the virtuous person should pursue to reduce suffering—the eightfold path. These are, in effect, a basic guide to living in a way that reduces suffering, both for yourself and everyone else. Two parts focus on wisdom. The first is right view, which is the effort to gain the correct view of reality. The next

is right intention or thought, which, for Buddhists, means cultivating compassion for all sentient beings. The next four focus on conduct. Right speech favors telling the truth over lying and slander and speaking kindly and usefully rather than using abusive language or engaging in gossip. Right action and right livelihood basically require one to find ways of living that don't promote suffering, and right effort recognizes that this kind of virtuous conduct requires self-discipline. The final two parts of the eightfold path concern mental discipline. Right mindfulness requires cultivating an awareness of all one's activities and thoughts, while right concentration is the reflection on and internal investigation of one's thoughts, which is associated with meditation.<sup>4</sup>

Again, the BBC has rather a nice little video encapsulating the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and you can find it [here](#).

### 9.3. The Exemplar of a Virtuous Person

Often virtue ethics approaches offer an ideal or exemplary person as a kind of role model to emulate. Similarly, we tell stories about vicious people to understand how their lives can go awry so that we do not make the same poor choices that they did.

#### STOP & THINK

Who to you exemplifies a good person who is living well?

**What are their virtues?**

Can you recount a story about them that reveals their virtuous character?

Such exemplars redirect ethics from the individual actions and moral dilemmas that are, typically, the focus of consequentialism and deontology to a more holistic way of thinking about a moral life.

## Notes

1. Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), 1124a, 1.
2. Aristotle, 1125b, 32-3.
3. John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2002), 53.
4. Koller, 59-61.

# 10. Relational Ethics

Whereas virtue ethics tends to consider how *individuals* can be perfected or perfect themselves, relational ethics begins from the idea that nobody is truly self-made. All relational ethics starts with a particular view about who we are, how we live, and the nature of human psychology that emphasizes relationality. The idea is we all are who we are through our relationships and so ethics needs to value and pay attention to these relationships. Different traditions take different approaches to thinking about which relationships create and constrain our moral lives.

We begin with feminist ethics, which was developed in reaction to the ethical traditions of Europe—especially Utilitarianism and Kantianism and, to a lesser extent, Aristotelianism—as well as the political discourse on rights that arose out of these theories (discussed below in section [4.13](#)). In the 1970s and 80s, many feminists noted that the traditional European accounts of ethics seemed to assume that ethical actors were all independent and self-made. They argued, first, that people vary significantly in their degree of dependency and, in fact, nobody is truly fully independent and, second, that inequality shapes many people’s lives and severely curtails their choices in ways that are ethically relevant. We are going to think about this first kind of relational ethics as focussing on personal relationships and this second kind of relational ethics as focussing on political relationships.

Then we turn to ethical approaches that foreground communal relationships. These are less concerned with power than the kinds of relationships that we will consider under the moniker “political.” This approach can be understood through the African idea of *ubuntu*, which places the community at the centre of moral decision-making. Finally, we will consider relational approaches that go beyond human relationships to *all our relations* and *seven generations*, including those in the *more-than-human* world. This is an ethical framing that is common in traditional Indigenous ontologies and value systems throughout North America.

## 10.1. Focus on Personal Relations

When feminist philosophers began to engage ethical theory in the 1970s, they noticed that the then dominant approaches to ethics—Utilitarianism and Kantianism—seemed to assume that the goal of ethics was to adjudicate conflicts and facilitate decision-making in the public sphere. By this, they meant that ethics seemed only to capture issues that arose outside the home with parties who were mature, independent, impartial adults. The private sphere—i.e., home life, which is characterized by relationships of dependency and partiality—was simply not addressed. The feminist critique was twofold. First, ethics needs to address the importance of personal relationships in our lives. Second, humans are, in fact, thoroughly relational beings and the idea that anyone is *self-made* is simply a myth. Minimally, all humans require huge amounts of care and education at the beginning of our lives if we are to develop into capable adults, and, throughout our lives, we depend on others looking after us or helping us with various activities—from helping us secure work to addressing our most intimate personal needs.

This gave rise to a distinctive ethical approach called *care ethics*. Care ethics recognizes that relationships of care, for instance parents caring for young children, cannot be captured by the ethical theories that have dominated European and settler traditions. After all, young children are not autonomous in a Kantian sense as they do not have the capacity to reason, nor do they have the ability to overcome their inclinations. They are also extremely vulnerable; so, we may have special obligations to our own children because of their vulnerability and because we are in a unique and specific relationship of care with them. Perhaps most importantly of all, the ethical relationships that parents have with their children, indeed that all of us have with family members more generally, are emotional relationships. Caring for a child requires, not impartiality, but rather a thoroughly partial emotional investment in the life and wellbeing of the child.

Love and care are not incidental to these relationships or a fortunate consequence of them; they are the very stuff of them.

A similar idea can also be found in ethics in the tradition of *Kongfuzi* (or Confucian ethics). *Confucianism* emphasizes that we learn how to be good people through our relationships with our family members, particularly our parents. We learn the moral emotions, such as love, through loving our parents. The respect and love that we have for our parents is, in effect, the root for the love and respect that we show to other people as adults. In this way, Confucians believe that the capacity for humaneness, our moral concern for humanity generally (*ren*, sometimes translated as human-heartedness<sup>1</sup>), emerges through our personal filial relationships.<sup>2</sup>

## 10.2. Focus on Political Relations

Although relational ethicists who focus on personal relations often emphasize the positive ways in which these constitute us, it is important to remember that families can be places of inequality and terrible suffering. Children are not only in need of care from their parents but are extraordinarily vulnerable to abuse and neglect. In patriarchal cultures, wives are often seen as subordinate to their husbands and have their freedom curtailed and their interests and needs overlooked or marginalized. Daughters are often similarly devalued.

These patriarchal views of women extend beyond the home. This makes it more difficult for women to leave abusive domestic situations and find better lives elsewhere because they are frequently seen as incompetent or incapable of filling any roles other than those traditionally assigned to women. Moreover, they may have internalized these patriarchal views so that they see themselves (and other women) as being properly subordinate to men and unfit for anything but traditional feminine roles. Such assumptions make it extremely difficult for women to succeed in various professions where they may be assumed to be deficient in virtues associated with men—such as rationality, morality, strength, and competence. Because, in a patriarchal culture, traditional women's roles—including essential, skilled care labour, such as growing or obtaining and cooking food, cleaning, and childcare—are devalued, men often refuse to take on care labour as they find it demeaning or lack the relevant skills. The feminist slogan, *the personal is political*, refers to the way in which inequality in our personal relationships scale up to produce inequality in our society and inequality in our society scales down and affects almost every aspect of our daily lives .

Early feminist theories addressing the injustices of patriarchy were often criticized for only voicing the perspectives of straight, white, Anglo, settler, middle-class women without disabilities. Many of the women overlooked by these theories pointed out that they often experienced inequality quite differently. For instance, some suggested that poor women enjoyed greater equality with poor men than middle-class women did with middle-class men but greater inequality overall. Poor women did not long for access to the public sphere of work outside the home as they already worked outside the home, albeit often for wages significantly lower than men's wages. Many women maintained that much of the discrimination they faced had more to do with their racial or ethnic identity, their class, their sexuality, or their disability status than their gender. Moreover, not infrequently, this discrimination was enacted or exacerbated by more privileged women, some of whom claimed to be feminist.

US legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, coined the term *intersectionality* to capture this idea.<sup>3</sup> She recognized that in societies that have multiple axes of oppression—such as racism, colonialism, ableism, hetero- and cissexism, and classism—people who belong to more than one oppressed group often experience oppression in distinctive ways that are highly particular. These patterns of oppression can be difficult to predict and understand from the perspective of those who do not share similar social positionings and experiences.

If we are committed to equality for all, we must pay attention to intersectional issues. This type of analysis draws

attention to the fact that we are all located in complex webs of social power and privilege. While in an ideal world we might be able to treat everyone (outside our friends and family) impartially, in societies that are structured by patterns of injustice and inequality that disadvantage particular groups, we need to take the reality of these political relationships into account when we are making ethical decisions.

Because it is often difficult for those who are privileged in a certain respect to understand the true challenges and restrictions of those who aren't, it is particularly important to have people who experience oppression involved in decision-making about policies intended to address that oppression. Disability rights advocates coined the phrase "nothing about us without us"<sup>4</sup> to capture this idea. This is not only a call to inclusion but also a call to those allies who wish to support their cause to exercise humility—a warning that well-intentioned paternalism can actually exacerbate harms and inequality and undermine the autonomy of those whom one wishes to help. Understanding how the complex political relationships that we have with each other inform various ethical challenges and dilemmas is key to this relational approach to ethics.

### 10.3. Focus on Communal Relations

While political approaches to relational ethics draw attention to the many social and political differences between us, communal approaches tend to focus on the collective. Collectivism is quite common in ethical theories outside the European tradition (indeed, we have already seen a version of it with Mohism in 3.7.1) and is often part of a critique of that tradition. The concept of *ubuntu* is a good example, as it both rejects European individualism and has been employed as a post-colonial ethical anchor for rebuilding more just communities and positive relationships in societies recently freed from colonial oppression.<sup>5</sup> In South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process, set up to document and deal with the appalling human rights abuses that happened under apartheid, *ubuntu* has been an important principle that has shaped how this process of restorative justice has been understood.<sup>6</sup>

Although, as South African jurist, Yvonne Mokgoro notes, *ubuntu* is not easily definable, particularly in a foreign tongue,<sup>7</sup> there are, nonetheless, a number of sayings and stories that point to the central idea. *The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* quotes Ms. Susan van der Merwe, whose husband was murdered in 1978:

The Tswanas have an idiom which I learned from my husband which goes 'a person is a person by other people, a person is only a person with other people'. We do have this duty to each other. The survival of our people in this country depends on our co-operation with each other. My plea to you is, help people throw their weapons away...No person's life is a waste. Every person's life is too precious.<sup>8</sup>

The key ideas here are that the well-being and indeed the survival of anyone in a community is intimately connected with the wellbeing and survival of *everyone* in the community. From such a perspective simply pursuing one's own self-interest while neglecting or harming other members of the community is, in effect, harming oneself. It is unintelligible because it is contrary to one's own self-interest. Thus, *ubuntu* is associated with harmony and solidarity at the level of the group with processes aimed at adjudicating conflict focussed on the restoration of peace in the community.<sup>9</sup> As Mokgoro notes:

Group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation and collective unity have, among others been defined as key social values of *ubuntu*....[I]ts value has also been viewed as a basis for a morality of co-operation, compassion, communalism and concern for the interests of the collective respect for the dignity of personhood, all the time emphasising the virtues of that dignity in social relationships and practices.<sup>10</sup>



Thus, ubuntu not only emphasizes a strongly relational ethics that focuses on the community, it is also deeply humanist. Ubuntu recognizes that one's own humanity is inextricably bound with the humanity of others.

#### 10.4. Focus on *All My Relations*

While the other three types of approach to relational ethics typically highlight different types of relations between humans, the last includes these but goes beyond to consider relationships in the *more-than-human* world. This is the approach exemplified by the phrase *all my relations* that is central to the worldview and ethical orientation of many Indigenous peoples in what settlers have called North America. This perspective emphasizes not only the reality of our physical, psychological, and spiritual dependence on the many different beings in the world around us but also our capacity to affect these beings. For many Indigenous traditions, it is not only nonhuman animals who are included in these relations but plants and parts of the non-organic world also.

Importantly, the relations acknowledged are not simply relationships of interdependency but also relationships of respect. For instance, many traditional Mi'kmaq stories identify ways that plants and animals guide and teach humans. These stories recognize that nonhuman beings do not exist to serve humans but have their own moral status that demands respect.<sup>11</sup> Failing to respect other beings can bring disastrous results to those humans who ignore their obligations to the more-than-human world. This ethical orientation brings with it gratitude for their sustaining our lives and a commitment to sustaining theirs. This means that when one takes something from the world one should only take what is needed. When one takes something from the world one should only take what is needed, which not only shows respect for what is taken but also ensures that there is plenty for others (human and nonhuman, alike). Reciprocity is often emphasized with the view that one should give back for the gifts that one receives. In this way, relationships remain mutually beneficial. Just as ubuntu emphasizes the value of harmony in the human community, *all my relations* emphasizes the value of harmony of humans with each other as well as the many other beings in the natural environment.

An adjacent ethical teaching in Indigenous cultures is the *seven generations teaching*. The seventh generation holds significance for many Indigenous peoples, such as the Anishinabek, Ojibway, and Haudenosaunee.<sup>12</sup> When thinking about how one should act, this teaching recommends that one consider the actions and traditions of the previous seven generations and the effect of one's actions on the seven generations after oneself. The foundational principle of this teaching is that our choices, actions, and mistakes have a ripple effect throughout history. As Linda Clarkson, Vern Morissette, and Gabriel Régallet explain:

There is a teaching passed down from our [Ojibway] ancestors that crystallizes our sense of responsibility and our relationship to the earth that arises out of the original law. It is said that we are placed on the earth (our Mother) to be the caretakers of all that is here. We are instructed to deal with the plants, animals, minerals, human beings and all life, as if they were a part of ourselves. Because we are a part of Creation, we cannot differentiate or separate ourselves from the rest of the earth. The way in which we interact with the earth, how we utilize the plants, animals and the mineral gifts, should be carried out with the seventh generation in mind. We cannot simply think of ourselves and our survival; each generation has a responsibility to “ensure the survival for the seventh generation.”<sup>13</sup>

In thinking about our relation to the generations before us and the ones after us, the seven generations teaching emphasizes the connection with our ancestors and descendants. We live in a continuum, with each of us having parents, grandparents, and great grandparents (who, in turn, had parents, grandparents, and great grandparents), who we learn from and sometimes teach; and many of us have children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren (and some of them will have children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren), who we teach and learn from.<sup>14</sup> Some of us will spend time

in every role. Everyone has a responsibility to learn from and teach past and present generations. Awareness of this interconnectedness within the community encourages one to act selflessly and sustainably for future generations.

Importantly, the seven generations teaching is not only forward looking, but it also emphasizes the importance of continuity with traditional and cultural origins. Failure to know and consider one's place in one's cultural history and traditions leads to alienation and lack of identity in one's life. Knowing who you are and how you fit in the world is important for making ethical choices. Moreover, in knowing our history and traditions, we can avoid making the same mistakes as our ancestors. Such history and tradition should inform, guide, and support our present choices as we think about our impacts on future generations. We have a responsibility to bridge the gap between our past and future—by upholding and maintaining tradition, learning from our ancestors, and passing traditions onto our descendants. The responsibility to all our relations is inherited from one's ancestors and passed onto future generations, solidifying one's bond with their community.

## Notes

1. John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2002), 220.
2. Koller, 222. Confucianism is a good example of an ethical theory that employs many of the different approaches we have discussed here. From these filial relationships come specific duties. The humaneness that follows from filial piety is, in effect, a virtuous character, which is valuable, in part, because it brings about good consequences.
3. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.
4. Anne-Marie Callus and Amy Camilleri-Zahra, "Nothing About Us Without Us: Disabled People Determining their Human Rights Through the UNCRPD," *Mediterranean Review of Human Rights* 1 (2017): 1–26, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/56964/1/MHRR1A1.pdf>.
5. Michael Onyebuchi Eze, "I am Because You Are," *UNESCO Courier* (2011): 11–13, <https://en.unesco.org/courier/octobre-decembre-2011/i-am-because-you-are>.
6. Desmond Tutu, et al., *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume 1 (South Africa: Government of National Unity, 1998), 125–8, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>.
7. Yvonne Mokgoro, "Ubuntu and the Law in South Africa," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 18. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/pej/article/view/43567>
8. Tutu, *Truth and Reconciliation*, 128.
9. Mokgoro, "Ubuntu," 24–5.
10. Mokgoro, 19.
11. Margaret Robinson, "Animal Personhood in Mi'kmaq Perspective," *Societies* 4 (2014): 672–688. <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/4/4/672>.
12. John Borrows, *Seven generations, seven teachings ending the Indian Act* (West Vancouver: National Centre for First Nations Governance, 2008), [https://fngovernance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/john\\_borrows.pdf](https://fngovernance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/john_borrows.pdf); Linda Clarkson, Vern Morrisette, and Gabriel Régallet, *Our Responsibility to the Seventh Generation: Indigenous Peoples and Sustainable Development* (Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2001), <https://www.iisd.org/publications/our-responsibility-seventh-generation>; "Seven Generations – the Role of Chief," PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/warrior/content/timeline/opendoor/roleOfChief.html>.
13. Clarkson, Morrisette, and Régallet, "Seventh Generation," 12.
14. Academic Algonquin, "Seven Generations," YouTube, video, May 18, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHg3enCCyCM>.

## II. Summary of Ethical Lenses

We have here surveyed four fundamentally different approaches to ethics that focus on different things: consequences; duties and actions; character; and relationships. Within each of these different approaches, there are different lines of thought. [Consequentialist approaches](#) might value different ends and have different views about who counts and how to count them. [Deontological approaches](#) may ground duties on social roles, past actions, or reason alone. [Virtue ethics approaches](#) have different ideals of the good life or living well. [Relational approaches](#) attend to different types of relations and how they inform what we should do.

Although the specific theories and concepts we have canvassed are well-known in philosophical ethics, the descriptions given here are simply the bare bones and significantly incomplete. In some cases, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita* ([3.8.1](#) duties based on social role) and Confucianism ([3.10.1](#) focus on personal relations), we have simply taken an idea that exemplifies the type of approach of interest to us while ignoring central ideas and theories associated with these texts. In these cases (and some others), the classification (as consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, or relational ethics) is controversial. The Asian traditions, in particular, are sufficiently vast and have sufficiently many different theories and schools within them that authoritative categorization under these lenses is impossible. Nonetheless, in their application to moral life, these differences between schools often boil down to focusing (more or less) on consequences, or actions, or character, or relations.

Although we have only offered a flavor of what is out there, we hope it is clear that ethics is, and always has been, a truly global pursuit and, moreover, that there is both remarkable commonalities across many cultural traditions along with striking differences. In a multicultural society that is struggling to move beyond its colonial past, it is important not to overlook voices that have valuable ethical insights and can add to our ethical discourse. Moreover, given the extraordinary ethical challenges that face the human species, we not only need every possible theoretical tool at our disposal, but we need every person to feel they have a place and a stake in the conversation.

At the same time, we now have a practical tool for thinking about ethical questions. As we noted at the beginning of this primer, ethics starts with the question, “what should I do?” Now, when considering your various options, you can apply each lens to see how it directs your attention to the consequences, the nature of the action and your motivations, your own character and who you want to be, and your various relationships and how they constrain and inform your options.

## PART IV

# BEYOND THE ETHICAL LENSES

Some ethical concepts defy easy categorization under one or other of the ethical lenses and in this part, we will consider two such cases—[rights](#) and [ahimsa](#). While the idea of rights originates in the ethical, political, and legal traditions of Europe (particularly, Kantian ethics [discussed above in [3.8.3](#)] and social contract theories [mentioned below, [5.14](#)]), rights discourse has become somewhat detached from these theories and embraced globally in documents like the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We will only touch on a few key components of rights discourse but it's useful to be conversant in these basic concepts as people often end up talking about rights in ethical disputes. What also becomes evident are the limitations of rights as an ethical concept and its dependence on more robust and nuanced ethical theories.

Rather than being somewhat detached from the four ethical lenses, ahimsa touches on all of them. Ahimsa—commonly translated as 'nonviolence'—originates from the philosophical and religious traditions of south Asia and has been a guiding principle in multiple social justice movements. Avoiding the harmful consequences of violence, criticizing the motives and nature of violent action, cultivating a nonviolent character, and attending to the relationships produced by violence and nonviolence are all central to ahimsa. No one of them is more fundamental or prior to any other. By considering both ahimsa and rights, we can see both the power and the limitations of the ethical lens approach.

## 12. Ahimsa

*Ahimsa* has been an important moral principle in South Asia for thousands of years and plays a significant role in the traditions of Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and, some would say, Sikhism. Although each of these traditions frames the importance of *ahimsa* and its application in rather different ways, all extend *ahimsa* beyond humans alone. The basic idea is that *himsa*, commonly translated as violence, should be avoided whenever possible. Violence is simply the act of harming, whether intentionally and directly (say, through killing another being), intentionally and indirectly (say, through directing someone else to kill another being), or unintentionally (say, by acting or failing to act in a way that kills another being).

As a Gandhi scholar Veena Howard notes, “[u]nlike any other religion, *ahimsa* defines Jainism.”<sup>1</sup> In the Jain tradition, all beings are thought to have souls that, in their embodied forms, can experience harm. According to the Jain Sutras:

All living beings desire happiness, and have revulsion from pain and suffering. They are fond of life, they love to live, long to live...Hence no living being should be hurt, injured, or killed...All things breathing, all things existing, all things living, all things whatsoever, should not be slain, or treated with violence, or insulted, or tortured, or driven away...[Anyone] who hurts living beings..., or gets them hurt by others, or approves of hurt caused by others, augments the world’s hostility towards [themselves].<sup>2</sup>

For Jains, all beings are categorized based on the number of senses they possess. Humans and other animals possess the most, with five senses, while plants only possess one. The more senses a being has, the more ways in which they are vulnerable to harm and the greater the injury that can be done to them through violence.

Jains recognize four types of *himsa*: defensive violence, violence brought about through one’s profession, violence brought about through one’s activities of daily living, and intentional violence. They recognize that complete *ahimsa* is impossible but, nonetheless, strive to achieve it. Jain monks and nuns avoid *all* forms of violence, so they will, for instance gently sweep the path ahead of them, so as to avoid stepping on any insects. In the face of violence, they refrain from violent self-defence and many will not prepare their own food or have food prepared for them but only accept food as a gift. For Jain laypeople, however, *ahimsa* isn’t as strict and includes conduct such as adopting vegetarian or vegan diets and avoiding occupations and conflicts that may involve violence.

It is important to note that *ahimsa* does not mean passivity. It is not just the negation of violence but can involve acting in creative ways that are free of violence and that promote a future free from violence. Some contemporary peace advocates argue that nonviolence can offer a comprehensive normative framework of ethics as a guide to personal and political action.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a number of leaders in social justice movements have been inspired by *ahimsa*, such as Mohandas Gandhi, in the struggle for Indian self-rule, and Martin Luther King Jr., who was a key leader in the US civil rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

As you can see, while *ahimsa* draws attention to each of the four lenses considered above, it does not focus on any one lens more than another. Clearly, *ahimsa* is consequentialist as it begins from the notion that causing harm is ethically wrong. Anything that you might do that would result in another being’s injury should be avoided. However, *ahimsa* is also deontological. The motivations behind our actions must align with nonviolence. It is not enough to have nonviolent deeds; nonviolent words and thoughts are also required. We should intend peace, compassion, and nonviolence because, in a way, these actions are good in and of themselves.

Importantly, *ahimsa* does not just refer to ethical codes of conduct, but also the virtues that allow one to be harmonious with oneself and society. *Ahimsa* and the related habits of mind and emotions, like compassion, must be cultivated. Gandhi believed that *ahimsa* was intimately tied to the virtue of self-control—absolute nonviolence to all living creatures requires one to conquer the seductions of the ego and exercise self-control and limitation.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, *ahimsa* is relational. A

commitment to ahimsa draws attention to the ways in which beings are interconnected with each other and vulnerable to harm from each other. Because of these interconnections and the negative effects that violence has on one's own character, any violence towards a living being results in violence towards oneself.

## Notes

1. Veena R. Howard, "Nonviolence in the 3 Dharma Traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism," in *Routledge Handbook of Pacifism*, ed. Andrew Fiala, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 81.
2. Howard, 81.
3. Andrew Fiala, "Pacifism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2021 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/pacifism>.
4. "Nonviolence," in *Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia*, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/nonviolence>.
5. Howard, "Nonviolence," 89-90.

## 13. Rights and Privileges

Unlike some of the moral theories discussed in the last chapter, everyone who is reading this primer is likely familiar with the term “rights.” For example, you might have heard of human rights, property rights, or even used phrases like “It’s my right,” in arguments of your own. While the term “right” is often deployed in legal contexts, as with documents like the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, our focus in this resource is on moral rights. Legal rights are articulated and upheld by legal codes and practices, whereas moral rights are rights that are justified or motivated by moral arguments. In some cases, these rights overlap. After all, one would hope that some legal rights became enforceable by law *because* there are powerful moral grounds to protect them. However, it is critical that one does not assume that just because something is enforceable by law that it is a morally justified way to act or that every moral right should be protected by law. Through studying ethics, one may come to realize that a particular moral right should be protected by law or that some laws should be scrapped or changed because they are unfair or otherwise unethical. While arguments at the intersection of ethics and law are beyond the scope of this primer, we do note the tendency for discussions of ethical, political, and legal rights to blur into each other.

So, what are rights? Rights are entitlements or enforceable claims that we make in relation to others. If one is entitled to a certain right, then other individuals or groups are obligated to protect or fulfill that right. Suppose you claim that all people have a right to potable drinking water. Such a right brings with it the responsibility for someone to ensure that any given person has access to potable drinking water. In this way, rights generate strong duties that we have to each other. If we fail to respect someone’s right to something, then we commit a serious injustice to them. Some philosophers hold that rights override all other moral claims, though this is contentious. As we will see, we often face the challenge of adjudicating among competing rights claims.

### 13.1. Categorization of Rights

There are several key distinctions that specify different types of rights—*negative* versus *positive* rights; *active* versus *passive* rights; *in rem* versus *in personam* rights; and the distinction between *rights* and *privileges*. Identifying these different types of rights and understanding how they relate to each other not only helps one assess the character of any given rights claim but also elucidates what rights are and how they relate to the actions of rightholders and those who ought to respect, protect, and uphold rights.

Negative rights are freedoms that obligate others to not interfere with a rightholder’s actions. For example, you have a right to not be assaulted. This right obligates the rest of us to not physically strike or harm (that is, assault) you. A positive right, in contrast, is a right that entitles one to a specific good or service, obligating at least one other person to ensure one’s access to that good or service. Consider the right to clean drinking water. This right might obligate a parent to ensure that their child has water to drink or obligate a government to ensure that its citizens have access to safe drinking water. In brief, a positive right requires others to *do* something and a negative right requires that others *not do* (or forebear from doing) something.

Negative rights can be further subdivided into active and passive rights. Active rights are the rights one has to act in a way that is free from the interference of others. Conversely, passive rights are the rights one holds to not be treated in certain ways. An example of the former is the right to freedom of speech, where one has the right to voice their opinions and say what they believe without someone else silencing them. An example of a passive right is the right to not be discriminated against because of one’s cultural, racial, sexual, political, etc. identities.

Notice that active and passive rights can be in tension with each other. One's freedom to act without interference (active) is limited by the freedom of others to not have certain things done to them (passive). So, in the above examples, one's right to freedom of speech is limited by their duty to uphold the right of others to not be discriminated against through actions like hate speech. It is difficult to balance active negative rights with passive negative rights. Different moral theories place different emphases on which rights should override others.

Another key distinction concerns the identification of who bears the obligations to respect, fulfill, or protect a given right, which is captured by the distinction between *in personam* versus *in rem* rights. *In personam* rights hold against one or more specifiable persons. For example, every person has the right to a safe working environment. Because of the relationship between employer and employee, this means employees hold this right against their employers. Thus, employers have obligations to their employees to make sure their workplace is safe. On the other hand, *in rem* rights hold against people in general. Recall the right to not be assaulted. This right is not held against specific persons but against anyone and everyone.

## 13.2. Privileges

Rights—claims that generate correlative duties in other persons or institutions—are contrasted with *privileges* (also called *liberties* or *freedoms*). To have a privilege means that a rightholder's freedom to act (or not act) does not require that anyone has a duty to protect the rightholder's action. Privileges are unprotected freedoms, meaning that the freedom to act how one wishes doesn't entail corresponding duties in others. For example, if you have a driver's license, you have the privilege to drive. No one has a duty to ensure that you have the means to drive—you are simply free to drive without placing a responsibility on anyone else to ensure that you can drive.

## 13.3. Rightholders

But, who has rights? In most philosophical and political discourses, the existence of a right means that every individual of equal moral status deserves that right. So, for instance, many philosophers would hold that, in virtue of our dignity as human beings, every non-fetal human has a claim to certain rights. (Note, many rights theorists take *dignity* to mean something like Kantian idea of being an end in itself<sup>1</sup>, discussed above [3.8.3](#)). However, there are others who hold that various non-human entities have rights. Most commonly, some have suggested that those non-human animals that have capacities and interests that are much the same as the morally relevant capacities and interests found in humans should share some of the same rights as humans. Here again, we see the issue of moral status. The question of who should have rights and which rights they should have is, in effect, the question of who counts morally and how we should count them. Grappling with such questions requires ethicists to go back to moral theory (such as those discussed in [Part III](#)) to tease out the underlying justification for the rights in question.

## 13.4. The Function of Rights in Ethical, Political, and Legal Theory

There are two approaches to the function of rights in contemporary discourse: the will theory and the interest theory. The *will theory* holds that rights define individuals as dignified moral agents whose status demands that their agency and autonomy be protected. Thus, the main function of rights according to the will theory is to give people control over



their actions and ensure that others have a duty to act in ways that respect this autonomy. We can see here the Kantian origins of rights discourse as, in effect, rights are thought to protect the autonomy of those individuals deemed ends in themselves. Conversely, the *interest theory* is concerned with protecting human interests that are critical to human flourishing. Here, we might think that consequentialist and virtue theories are likely to be the most effective grounds for justifying and elucidating such claims.

While these theories overlap in some of the rights they advocate, the interest theory determines which positive rights one should have because of interests that are essential to flourishing. For example, if one believes that all humans should be free from chronic pain, then an interest theorist might claim a right to healthcare services that protect against chronic pain (like palliative care). Alternatively, a will theorist might argue that one has a right to (a level of) healthcare because healthcare is necessary to protect against threats to one's autonomy and dignity. Both theories are subject to various difficulties and criticisms and recourse to more basic ethical theory is often required to resolve disputes.

### 13.5. Objections to a Rights Approach

Despite its ubiquity in moral and especially political discourse, there are a number of difficulties with a rights approach. As noted, rightholders make claims against others who have corresponding duties. However, it is often difficult to know *who* is obligated to ensure and protect a given right. Consider the claim that all humans have a right to clean drinking water. Whose duty is it to ensure that people in our own community or elsewhere have access to water? Do we have an obligation to our neighbours to ensure that they have potable water? Is the local or national government responsible? Or, does the international community have a responsibility to ensure that all people have access to clean water? If so, does that mean that we, as university students and professors, have a moral obligation to provide clean water to others across the world? Setting aside the practical problems of motivating people to protect the rights of strangers on the other side of the globe and the political dangers of interfering in another nation's internal politics, the theoretical problem remains of how to determine who is obligated to protect this right.

Another difficulty of a rights approach is determining which rights are the most deserving of protection when rights conflict. As mentioned above (4.13.1), it is common for certain active rights to be limited by passive rights. However, this becomes more complicated when interest theorists and will theorists debate the various kinds of rights that ought to be respected, protected, upheld, or prioritized. Both approaches have their weaknesses. Neither has decisive replies to the problems of the other. Typically, intractable debates about competing rights require us to return to the ethical theories that ground them (such as deontology or consequentialism), reserving rights language for political discourses and legal contexts.

## Notes

1. Leif Wenar, "Rights", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition), §6.1. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/rights>.

PART V  
SELF-REGARDING ATTITUDES

## 14. Selfishness and Self-interest

Some people think that taking ethics seriously is naïve. Many may worry that if we don't look after our own best interests nobody else will. Indeed, we may think that each of us individually is best equipped to make judgements about what will be best for ourselves and resist the idea of offering help or accepting it from anyone else. Some people will defend such views on the basis of claims about the competitive character of human nature, appealing to capitalism or Darwinism (quite mistakenly, we should add), as grounds for thinking that everyone should single-mindedly pursue their own interests and preferences. If we have such an attitude, it is easy to see why we might be predisposed to selfishness.

Of course, all of us are, to some extent, concerned about our own self-interests and, indeed, most (though not all) of the moral theories canvassed above suggest that we *should* protect our own interests at least as much as everyone else's. However, selfishness, understood as simply pursuing one's own preferences and interests without any consideration of the preferences and interests of others, is not only generally considered immoral; it is also irrational.

First of all, it doesn't seem to be psychologically plausible. As relational theorists have pointed out, we are social beings who are for large parts of our lives intimately dependent on the good will and care of other people. Indeed, all of us are totally (or at least largely) dependent on others for most of the first couple of decades our lives and most of us experience such dependency to varying degrees and for varying lengths of time throughout our adulthood. The trust and nurturance that exist in healthy relationships of dependency are important for our emotional well-being. We psychologically benefit from helping each other.

Secondly, if everyone always behaved selfishly the vast majority and perhaps all of us would likely be considerably worse off than if we cooperated. This means that selfishly pursuing one's own self-interest would undermine one's self-interest, which is self-defeating.

Early modern political theorists in the liberal tradition recognized this and generalized from the ethics of personal interactions to the ethical justification of how we structure society and justify the limitations on our personal freedom within a society. English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, identified the situation where everyone simply pursues their own immediate self-interest as a "[war] of every one against every one" where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."<sup>1</sup> We are better off, thought Hobbes, if we enter into a social contract where we submit to a state power that maintains order. As we have already [seen](#), Mozi had much the same idea. (We might think that [ubuntu](#) also expresses a similar insight, though arguably a single-minded pursuit of personal self-interest isn't really intelligible from this perspective.) Most political philosophy is committed to trying to figure out the details of this idea.

It is worth noting that even those who tout the virtue of selfishness will typically defend some limits on individual liberty. After all, as we saw in the last chapter [4.13.2](#), rights come with corresponding duties. One cannot protect everyone's freedom without limiting people's freedom to act in ways that would limit the freedom of others. Respecting other people's rights inevitably entails curtailing some of our own preferences.

Thinking that everyone should simply pursue their own self-interest and not be asked to look after the interests of others also seems to be substantially unfair. After all, sometimes people are simply unlucky and need help from others through no fault of their own. To find ourselves in a world in which nobody has an obligation to help us when we are in terrible need—through sheer misfortune—would not at all serve our preferences and interests. So, our rational self-interest seems to require certain types of altruism or reciprocity.

Of course, some people will think that there is no such thing as luck and people have nobody but themselves to blame for their circumstances, so they don't deserve help from anyone else. However, this attitude simply overlooks not just bad luck but the reality that there are oppressive political structures that harm people and severely limit their options.

The failure to appreciate this reality tends to reflect a certain type of self-oriented thinking that fails to take seriously the challenges of other people's lives or the good luck and privileges of one's own.

## Notes

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Project Gutenberg, 2013), chapter 8, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>.

# 15. Exceptionalism

*Exceptionalism* is a form of self-oriented thinking that often undermines ethical decision-making. Exceptionalism is where one believes or acts as if one group (or person) is exempt from following the rules that everyone else must follow or is immune from being judged by the same standards as others. Typically (though not always), exceptionalism is self-serving. We tend to want special treatment for members of our own group, and we may tend to rationalize reasons why the general rules and standards shouldn't apply to us. One of the most common forms of exceptionalism is *nationalism*—though there are many others.

## STOP & THINK

As mentioned, nationalism is a common type of exceptionalist thinking.

**What other kinds of exceptionalism are there?**

It is important to remember that exceptionalism is not only a moral failure; it is a rational failure. Exceptionalist thinking treats one group or individual as different from every other when there is, in fact, no relevant difference. Of course, if there is a difference that justifies differential treatment, then this differential treatment could be fair and consistent. Sometimes the same rules *shouldn't* apply to everyone equally. Sometimes there *are* relevant facts that entail that it would be *unfair* to treat everyone exactly the same.

After all, sometimes we have a special obligation to the members of a certain group that justifies placing their interests over others. For instance, a teacher will typically prioritize the learning goals of their own students over those of other students who aren't in their classes. As another example, the members of our group may be systematically treated unfairly in some respects and given this injustice, it may be fairer to give us special opportunities. This is the logic behind most affirmative action initiatives. In such cases, getting clear on the facts is obviously important. Certainly, if one believes that a particular individual or group should be exempt from the rules governing everyone else, then one should expect to be able to give an argument justifying it.

Importantly, exceptionalism may infect the way in which we think about accountability. Particularly within certain groups—like professional organizations, political parties, or religious groups—there is a tendency to think that one is only truly accountable to the members of one's own group. This, however, is just a self-serving way of protecting oneself from criticism and is, again, a kind of moral failure. As a general rule, we should think of ourselves as accountable to everyone who is affected by our actions or who has an interest in our behaviour.

## 16. Moral Licensing

*Moral licensing* picks out another kind of ethical mistake that is grounded in inappropriate self-regard. This happens when people who have behaved ethically by some measure in the past feel this good behaviour licenses them to behave badly in the present. There is no reason to think this is a conscious or reasoned decision. Rather, it seems that the good behaviour in the past feeds into a positive self-image that then resists the negative implications of the present behaviour. So, for instance, someone who voted for a Black politician in the past might go on to vote for an overtly racist politician in the present, without thinking that what they are doing is racist. It is as if previous moral behaviour inoculate ourselves against current immoral behavior.

Of course, ethically speaking, such a view is absurd. Moral licencing is best thought of as a cognitive bias. As with other biases, we need to protect ourselves against making this kind of mistake if we are to hope to behave ethically. As with other emotional or subconscious reactions, the best ways to avoid cognitive biases that lead to unethical behaviour are evaluating decisions using the various ethical lenses discussed above, critical engagement with others who have very different perspectives, and careful reasoning.

## 17. Helpful Heuristics

Happily, there are a number of heuristics (“mental shortcuts”) that people have suggested to try to inoculate ourselves to the worst tendencies of self-interested biases. For instance, US political philosopher, John Rawls, proposed an interesting way of using rational self-interest to subvert exceptionalist thinking in political theory. He suggested that when we are trying to decide what a just society is or what a just solution to a social problem might be, we should imagine ourselves behind a *veil of ignorance*. By this, he meant that when we are trying to decide what social arrangement would be the most just, we should imagine that we don’t know what our position or role in society might be. He thought that if we make decisions about social arrangements imagining that we might be in the worst possible position in society, then we will favor decisions that will be fairer. The BBC has a nice brief introduction to this thought experiment [here](#). The veil of ignorance heuristic can be extended to thinking about how our own actions might affect or be judged by others.

Many cultures share another kind of tool to guard against self-regarding cognitive biases. In the Christian tradition, it is called the *Golden Rule*: “do to others what you want them to do to you” (Matthew 7:12). This passage references the Jewish law, which teaches, “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) and, unsurprisingly we can find much the same idea in Islamic teachings and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the history and teachings of these three religions are intimately connected and mirror each other in many ways, so it is unsurprising that they share this maxim. It is perhaps more surprising that we can find the same basic idea in India, China, and Africa. In the *Mahabharata*, one passage counsels, “One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Kong Fuzi taught “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”<sup>3</sup> These are just a few examples of the traditions where we can find this important reminder to avoid exceptionalist and selfish thinking.

Of course, the veil of ignorance and the Golden Rule are just heuristics and cannot offer perfect guidance. Some have complained that our imaginations are limited and that it is much better to attend to what the least fortunate in our society say they want rather than imagining ourselves in their shoes. Similarly, you may have some peculiar tastes and preferences so others may not want to be treated the same way as you would like to be. But arguably, such responses miss the point. These heuristics are helpful because they remind us that other individuals have lives as rich, complicated, and worthy of respect as our own.

Helpful heuristics aside, some of the best tools for challenging our own cognitive biases and self-interested attitudes have already been described in this primer—that is, philosophical argumentation, engaging in productive debates with others, and using the various ethical lenses to evaluate our options and decisions. One of the key reasons that these tools are so effective is that they slow down our deliberative and decision-making processes. Daniel Kahneman, who won the Nobel Prize for his research on human decision-making, describes two ways that neurotypical human brains process information and make decisions: *fast thinking* and *slow thinking*.<sup>4</sup> Slow thinking describes the rational and deliberative thought processes that allow humans to think critically about their beliefs, values, and experiences when making choices.<sup>5</sup> The slow thinking system, however, requires significant mental effort. Kahneman has found that—although, as rational agents, we *identify* with the slow thinking process—fast thinking is more influential in daily tasks and decision-making. The fast thinking system takes past experiences, judgements, and decisions and unreflectively applies these previous patterns to current decision-making; thus, saving mental effort. However, it also makes us susceptible to cognitive biases and errors in thinking, like the self-interested biases discussed above. Kahneman’s research shows that when we allow our brains to run on autopilot, are cognitively busy or exhausted, or avoid tasks that engage our slow thinking processes, then we are more susceptible to selfish, unethical, and even discriminatory behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

Using the tools that we described in this primer will help you engage your slow thinking processes and avoid the cognitive biases and exceptionalist thinking that might lead to unethical attitudes or behaviour. Productive debate and

philosophical argumentation can help one understand alternative positions and evaluate the strength of one's own reasons for accepting a given conclusion. The ethical lenses can help one think through decisions about how to act from various perspectives that have different starting points or central commitments. And the helpful heuristics, described above, can disrupt the fast thinking that we subconsciously use to make most of our small, everyday decisions when our choices matter morally. Ethics helps one think critically about the attitudes, beliefs, and practices we might take for granted—attitudes, beliefs, and practices that might be engrained in our automatic, fast thinking habits.

## Notes

1. For example, see Justin Parrot, "Al-Ghazali and the Golden Rule: Ethics of Reciprocity in the Works of a Muslim Sage," *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 16, no. 2 (2017): 68-72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2017.1281067>.
2. Richard H. Davis, "A Hindu Golden Rule, in Context," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, edited by Jacob and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum, 2008), 146-56.
3. Confucius, *The Analects* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2016), XV. 23, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dal/detail.action?docID=4697581>.
4. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2013), 10-12.
5. Kahneman, 21.
6. Kahneman, 37.



## PART VI

# CONCLUSION

The reflections on problematic self-regard in the previous part bring us back to the point that we started with. **You cannot avoid ethics.** Whatever path we take in life, ethical problems will arise, and we will be challenged to determine for ourselves what it means to live well in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Each of us plays a part in creating more ethical practices in our society and creating a more just community. Different professions and applied ethics contexts come with their own particular challenges, but each can be assessed by employing much the same tools—including the ideas offered in this primer.

## Acknowledgements

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# Appendix

## i: Tips for Reading Philosophy Actively

### i. Pre-reading

Your aim in pre-reading should be simply to get a general sense of the text. You might look up terms that you don't know and flag what you take to be key points or arguments. (It's a good idea to write the definition or explication of the term in pencil in the margin of the text. This eliminates the need to look it up each time you read.) Don't worry if you don't understand all of the text at this initial stage.

### 2. Reading

1. Your chief aim in reading philosophy is to expose the structure that is hidden in the text. You might think of your task as that of providing a reverse outline of the material. Here are two methods you might use for exposing the structure of a passage:

- Flagging:
  - Flagging is a more active correlate of underlining. Flagging should be done in pencil so any flagging which indicates a misunderstanding of the text can be corrected in re-reading. You are encouraged to develop your own system of flags (some people use a combination of question marks, exclamation marks, asterisks and little faces).
  - Here are some flagging suggestions:

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>df<sup>n</sup></b>	This is a definition of a term
<b>??</b>	What? I don't get it
<b>=x?</b>	This means what exactly? (it can indicate ambiguity)
<b>why?</b>	Why is this so? (it can indicate hidden assumptions)
<b> </b>	This is important
<b>  </b>	This is very important
<b>{</b>	This is a development and explication
<b>sum</b>	This is a summary of the above
<b>arg A) B)</b>	This is an argument for a position
<b>1) 2)</b>	These are the steps of the argument
<b>concl</b>	Here's a conclusion
<b>e.g.</b>	Here's an example
<b>counter</b>	Here's a counterargument or counterexample

- Brief questions and comments can be jotted down in the margin and you might want to write a few words describing the piece at the beginning of the reading, in effect, a very brief abstract.
- One of the things you'll notice while flagging and re-reading texts that you've flagged is the number of different ways in which arguments are put together. Seeing how different argument structures operate with examples, counterarguments, etc. will help you to decide how to structure your own papers, how to support and defend your own positions.
- Finally, flag thoroughly, but sparingly. If you know what you're supposed to get out of the reading, read for that and related issues. Indiscriminate flagging suggests as little understanding of the text as no flagging at all.

- Note-taking:

- Many people find that they understand more of what they read if they include writing as part of the process of reading. Simply jotting down something—a question, a summary, what you take to be an important quote—is often an aid to active and intelligent reading. You might try this: at the top of the page write down the full bibliographical information for the text, then in the margin, keep track of the page numbers in the text and on the page keep brief notes. You might use different colours or divide the page into two sections to differentiate between paraphrasing the text and your reactions to and questions about the text. Use abbreviations, incomplete sentences, drawings, arrows, or whatever. Think of these notes as jogs to your memory rather than as the mere repetition of the text.

2. As you read, make sure that you know whether the author is stating his or her own view, a possible objection, a contrasting view, an objection to a contrasting view, etc. Try to determine the voice of each passage. Read for what is philosophically interesting, don't get distracted by side issues.

3. Try not to slide over parts of the text you don't understand.

- If you feel that you've understood the text, sentence by sentence, and yet you realize that you're foggy about the general idea, purpose, method or conclusion, go back over the text paying more attention to structural cues. Remember, arguments are comprised of premises and conclusions and your task is to discover how the one leads to the other.
- The following lists are of words and phrases that tend to indicate parts of arguments.

Conclusions often follow words and phrases like these:

in summary	hence	as a result
thus	accordingly	we may infer
therefore	I conclude that	which shows that
so	consequently	which entails that
it follows that	proves that	which means that
points to the conclusion that	which allows us to infer	which implies that

Premises often follow words and phrases like these:

because	given that	as indicated by
since	granted that	the reason that
for	as shown by	may be inferred from
whereas	inasmuch as	may be derived from
first	otherwise	in lieu of the fact that
in the first place	follows from	
secondly	in the eighteenth place	

- If you understand the general idea, but you don't have a firm grasp on a particular crucial passage, try to solve for the missing pieces. If you know that something is supposed to follow from premises that you do understand, see whether this looks like that conclusion with which you're having difficulty. Or if you are clear on the conclusion, but don't understand the premises, ask yourself what would lead to the conclusion, and see how this is related to the premises that you don't understand.

### 3. Re-reading

When you re-read you know enough about the text to read quickly over the parts you think are easy and to slow down for the interesting or difficult parts. You will have specific questions to bring to the text and you will be in an excellent position both to articulate criticisms and to clear up your misunderstandings.


You should know that when you adopt this three-step approach to reading philosophy, you'll probably find that you are reading much more slowly than you have in the past. But, you'll also be reading much more critically and effectively. Remember that in reading philosophy you are not simply trying to understand what the author means but you are also trying to put yourself in a position to engage with and assess the text.

NOTE: This Appendix is a modified version of Karen Pilkington's, "Suggestions as to how to read philosophy".

## 2: Critical Thinking Worksheet (ARG Assessment)

### 2.1. Interactive Critical Thinking Worksheet



 An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:  
<https://caul-cbua.pressbooks.pub/aep/?p=6#h5p-1>

## 2.2. Critical Thinking Worksheet – text version

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### A) ARGUMENT

Are they **ACCEPTABLE? RELEVANT?**

Give reasons (premises) for your argument:

Evaluate them:

Conclusion:

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### B) HIDDEN OR BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS:

Are they **ACCEPTABLE? RELEVANT?**

List any hidden or background assumptions that are important for your argument:

Evaluate:

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### C) ADDITIONAL INFORMATION NEEDED?

For example: missing premises, clarifying terms...

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### D) COMMENT ON EMOTIVE TONE:

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### E) GOOD GROUNDS?

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**F) COUNTERARGUMENTS AND COUNTEREXAMPLES**

What are some objections to your argument?

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**G) SUMMARY**

**Strongly Agree**

*Agree w/ repair*

*Undecided, need more  
info*

*Disagree w/repair*

**Strongly disagree**

EXPLAIN:

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