



# Introduction to Ethics: Thinking Through a Moral Life



# Introduction to Ethics: Thinking Through a Moral Life

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TRU OPEN PRESS  
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# Introduction

## About This Book

*Introduction to Ethics: Thinking Through a Moral Life* is an open educational resource designed to make the study of ethics more accessible and engaging. Developed through collaboration between faculty, students, and the TRU Open Press team at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), this book reflects a commitment to addressing inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes. The developers of this resource believe that open educational materials are key to making higher education more inclusive and accessible, ensuring that students everywhere have the opportunity to engage with essential philosophical ideas and develop the skills to think critically about moral questions.

Ethics asks some of the most profound—and pressing—questions we can face:

What does it mean to live a good life?

How should we treat other people—and ourselves?

What principles should guide our decisions?

And perhaps most unsettling of all: *why should we be moral in the first place?*

These are the kinds of questions that drive ethical inquiry. This book invites you to explore them seriously, critically, and with an open mind.

Ethics isn't just a topic to study—it's a way of thinking that helps us confront some of life's most important and difficult decisions. It doesn't always offer clear answers. Instead, it challenges assumptions, sharpens our reasoning, and encourages us to reexamine how we live and why we make the choices we do.

Some of the questions we'll explore together include:

- Is it ever right to lie to protect someone—or yourself?
- Are people naturally selfish, or are we truly capable of altruism?

- Do we owe more to the people we care about, or should everyone be treated equally?
- What do we owe to animals, the environment, or future generations?
- When our values conflict, how should we decide what's right?

These questions lead into deeper philosophical investigations. We'll ask not only what is right or wrong in certain situations, but *what makes something right or wrong*. We'll explore theories about how we should live and what moral principles guide our actions, what it means to treat others (and ourselves) ethically, and what justifies our moral commitments.

We will examine both **normative ethics**, which explores what we ought to do, and **metaethics**, which asks what morality itself is—what gives it authority, meaning, or truth.

You'll also meet a wide range of thinkers—some ancient, some modern—whose ideas continue to influence how people wrestle with ethical dilemmas today. Some focus on the consequences

of our actions (like utilitarianism), others emphasize duties or moral rules (like deontology), and still others look at character and virtue as the heart of ethics.

Ethics becomes most vivid when applied to real life:

*Should we avoid companies that exploit workers or harm the environment?*

*Is it wrong to eat meat if animals suffer?*

*Do we have a duty to compost or reduce waste to fight climate change?*

*How do power, privilege, and inequality shape our moral responsibilities?*

*Should we buy clothes made in sweatshops?*

*What responsibility do we bear in responding to climate change?*

*What should we do if our personal values conflict with social or legal expectations?*

This book provides a variety of tools to help you think through such questions:

**Primary texts** from influential philosophers, introduced with summaries to guide your reading

**Secondary readings** that clarify and expand the central ideas

**Discussion questions and thought experiments** to deepen your reflection and spark dialogue

**Case studies from Ethics Bowl Canada**, offering real-world scenarios for ethical analysis

And a practical guide on **how to read, write, and engage with philosophy** more effectively

At its core, ethics asks you to slow down, reflect, and take your thinking seriously. That doesn't mean always arriving at the "right" answer. It means learning to reason well, listen generously, and speak honestly in the face of disagreement

and uncertainty. Ethics is not just about how we think—but how we live.

So be prepared to feel challenged. Be open to rethinking old beliefs. And be ready for conversations that matter.

This isn't just a course about moral theories. It's an invitation to think more clearly, act more thoughtfully, and live more intentionally.

We hope this book helps you begin—or continue—that journey.

—Jenna Woodrow

# About the Authors

**JENNA WOODROW; HUNTER AIKEN; AND  
CALUM MCCRACKEN**

## About the Authors

### Dr. Jenna Woodrow

Dr. Jenna Woodrow is an associate teaching professor in philosophy at Thompson Rivers University. Her teaching and research areas centre on knowledge and justice.



*Jenna Woodrow*

Her work focuses on how norms evolve, the relationships between the land and people that ground justification, meaning, and practices of holding one another responsible, and the roles

that gender, oppression, and colonization play in producing knowledge and ignorance. She is deeply committed to open educational resources as a way of addressing epistemic inequities.

Jenna is also faculty advisor to the TRU Philosophy Club, founding chair of the Canadian Philosophical Association Decolonizing and Indigenizing Committee, chair of the Thompson Rivers University Faculty Association Equity Committee, member of the Philosophy in the Schools Project, and Western regional director and founding member of Ethics Bowl Canada.

Jenna is originally from Kuujuaq in northern Québec. Her parents, Louise Beaudoin and Keith Woodrow, and their parents, Horace Beaudoin and Beverly Campbell and Kaye Timmony and John Woodrow, are all from Tiohtiàke, colonially known as Montréal, in the traditional territories of the Kanien'kehá:ka peoples. Both her children, Lachlan Johnson and Saya Johnson, were born on the the traditional and unceded territories of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc within Secwépemc'ulucw. She is grateful to live work and play in these beautiful lands.

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Hunter, son of Lori Eggimann and Keith Aiken, is a 4th year Thompson Rivers University student majoring in social work and philosophy. He was born in Nanaimo of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla territory home of the Snuneymuxw peoples and raised in Fort St. John in



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*Calum McCracken*

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# Acknowledgement S

# The Open Press



The Open Press combines TRU's open platforms and expertise in learning design and open resource development. TRU Open Press supports the creation and reuse of open educational resources, while

encouraging open scholarship and  
research.

# Land Acknowledgement

Thompson Rivers University (TRU) campuses are situated on the traditional lands of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc (Kamloops) and the T'exelc (Williams Lake) within Secwepemcúl'ecw, the traditional and unceded territory of the Secwépemc. The rich tapestry of this land also encompasses the territories of the St'át'imc, Nlaka'pamux, T̓silhqot'in, Nuxalk, and Dakelh. Recognizing the deep histories and ongoing presence of these Indigenous peoples, we express gratitude for the wisdom held by this land. TRU is dedicated to fostering an inclusive and respectful environment,

valuing education as a shared journey. The TRU Open Press, inspired by collaborative learning on this land, upholds open access principles, and freely accessible education for all.

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# Kukstsélp. Thank you.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to the creation of this book. Each contributor is credited within the relevant chapters. This project is dedicated to reducing financial barriers and addressing inequities in education by providing high-quality, accessible Open Educational Resources.

Special thanks to the incredible team at **TRU Open Press**—their enthusiasm, expertise, and unwavering support made this book possible. I am also grateful to **Thompson Rivers University** for approving and

supporting this project as part of my sabbatical Winter 2025. Their long-standing commitment to OER initiatives and to my work in this area has been deeply appreciated.

I would especially like to thank my **student collaborators** whose ideas, feedback, and contributions helped shape the vision and content of this book. Their dedication, insight, and intellectual curiosity have enriched this project in meaningful ways.

Finally, to all of my students—past, present, and future—thank you. You continue to challenge, motivate, and inspire me. This work is for you.

# Accessibility

The web version of Introduction to Ethics has been designed to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, level AA. In addition, it follows all guidelines in Appendix A: Checklist for Accessibility of the Accessibility Toolkit – 2nd Edition.

Includes:

- **Easy navigation.** This resource has a linked table of contents and uses headings in each chapter to make navigation easy.
- **Accessible videos.** All videos in this resource have captions.
- **Accessible images.** All images in this resource that convey information have alternative text. Images that are decorative have empty alternative text.
- **Accessible links.** All links use descriptive link text.

## Accessibility Checklist

<b>Element</b>	<b>Requirements</b>	<b>Pass</b>
<b>Headings</b>	Content is organized under headings and subheadings that are used sequentially.	Yes
<b>Images</b>	Images that convey information include alternative text descriptions. These descriptions are provided in the alt text field, in the surrounding text, or linked to as a long description.	Yes
<b>Images</b>	Images and text do not rely on colour to convey information.	Yes
<b>Images</b>	Images that are purely decorative or are already described in the surrounding text contain empty alternative text descriptions. (Descriptive text is unnecessary if the image doesn't convey contextual content information.)	Yes
<b>Tables</b>	Tables include row and/or column headers with the correct scope assigned.	Yes
<b>Tables</b>	Tables include a title or caption.	Yes
<b>Tables</b>	Tables do not have merged or split cells.	Yes
<b>Tables</b>	Tables have adequate cell padding.	Yes
<b>Links</b>	The link text describes the destination of the link.	Yes

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<b>Links</b>	Links to files include the file type in the link text.	Yes
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<b>H5P</b>	All H5P activities have been tested for accessibility by the H5P team and have passed their testing.	Yes
<b>H5P</b>	All H5P activities that include images, videos, and/or audio content meet the accessibility requirements for those media types.	Yes
<b>Font</b>	Font size is 12 point or higher for body text.	Yes
<b>Font</b>	Font size is 9 point for footnotes or endnotes.	Yes
<b>Font</b>	Font size can be zoomed to 200% in the webbook or eBook formats.	Yes

## Known Accessibility Issues and Areas for Improvement

- Not applicable

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## Other Formats Available

- In addition to the web version, this book is available in a number of file formats, including PDF.

PART I  
HOW TO READ,  
WRITE, AND CITE IN  
PHILOSOPHY



# How to Read Philosophy

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# Introduction

As a student new to philosophy, the task of writing a philosophy paper is usually the first thing that you will focus on — and dread. However, what will become a more immediate concern for you is getting through your philosophy text without getting disheartened and overwhelmed. It is often difficult for newcomers to make sense out of some of the articles you are asked to read. The difficulties that you may discover are often simply due to your being unfamiliar with the writing styles of professional philosophers. This brief section will offer some ideas on how to work your way through the essays in this book.

Two bits of advice though:

1. Do not read while lying down on a couch or in bed, since you will probably want to drift off to sleep.
2. You will have to read each article more than once. Sorry, but as a film instructor of mine told me: “If a film isn’t worth watching twice, it isn’t worth watching once.”

Part of your difficulty getting “used to” reading philosophy is that the styles that you will encounter can be quite different than what you are familiar with. Styles can differ depending on the author’s intended audience (is it for laypersons or other philosophers?) and whether the article is a translated work (are you reading an English translation of a Greek text?). Even the century that the work is drawn from will affect your reading comfort level. As well, the particular school of thought that the author comes from can have significant impact on how the piece is presented (is the philosopher from the analytic or continental tradition?). Finally, the author’s own personality and style will often come through in his/her writing. So, even though all philosophy papers have the intent to convince the reader of some claim or other, how the author conveys his/her views can vary considerably.

A philosopher’s use of complicated phrases or sentences and the development of complex arguments, combined with your limited experience, requires that you develop an *active reading skill*. So, without further ado, here are a few tips on how to better understand and therefore appreciate philosophy papers.

# Understanding

First, skim over the article in order to get a general idea of what the author is trying to say. Pay attention to the title and subtitles, since they will often inform you of the area of inquiry. Pay attention to the opening paragraphs, since authors will sometimes offer summaries or overviews of their papers (e.g., “In this paper it will be argued that . . .”), or they will set the context of their paper (i.e., what area of concern their paper is in, what issue it will deal with, or even who it is in response to).

## Working Backwards

Working your way to the conclusion, you will want to make a note of it; this is what the author wants to convince you of. Underline it or highlight it (assuming it is your own copy and not the library’s). Try and write the conclusion down on a piece of paper in your own words, since that will help you remember it. Now, go back to the beginning of the

paper, and with the conclusion in mind, try and see how the author tries to take you there. In other words, think of the challenge as being akin to re-reading a murder mystery novel; it was fun to try and figure out who the murderer was, you saw clues here and there, and perhaps you were able to figure out some, but others eluded you. Now that you know who the culprit is, it can be fun to see how all the clues that you missed fit together. (This approach is one reason why I do not like Agatha Christie novels; it seemed to me that she never provided enough clues, and the murderer only shows up in the last five pages — so most of the novel is irrelevant to its ending! Of course, I am overstating my perception of her work, but you get the idea: It is no fun reading something or watching a movie when the author brings in a character right at the end with no previous connection to the story. Keep this in mind when you are planning your own essay!)

As you are reading each paragraph, you will find that the first and last sentences will often provide key elements of the author's thought process; here, you may find a conclusion or premise of an argument or sub-argument. Now, I should explain these terms so that you not only can analyze the

essay you are reading but also can also create your own well-founded arguments later on.

## Premises and Conclusions

What is important is that the author does in fact offer you a reason, any reason, for the conclusion; otherwise, they are just stating an opinion. If I said: “Universal health care is a good thing,” all you can do is either just smile or say something like, “That is nice,” for I have not given you anything more than a simple statement on what I believe. I have just given you an unsupported claim. Accordingly, while you may agree or disagree with my opinion, because I have not stated any justification for my view you do not know what to make of it, and so, you should never just accept it — even if you happen to agree. I must offer a defence of my position before you can determine if you should rationally accept or reject it. Even if you agree with the opinion, you may not agree with my reasoning, and that is just as important.

**Here is an example:**

**I say:** "I think capital punishment is wrong."

**You say:** "I agree!"

**Then I say:** "I think it's wrong *because* those murdering bastards should be tortured slowly instead!"

Now, because you did not wait to hear my reason, you have, or you have at least given me the appearance that you have, bought into my rather shocking perspective — but more than likely you would want to disagree with me. The moral of the story is that people can agree on the same points but for different reasons, and some of the reasons may be good and others may be bad.

### **Another quick example:**

**You and I** both agree that the sum of  $2 + 2$  is not 5.

**You (rightly)** believe that  $2 + 2$  does not equal 5 because it actually equals 4.

**I (wrongly)** believe that  $2 + 2$  does not equal 5 because it equals "Tuesday."

*You must consider both the premises and the conclusion before making a final*

*judgement about whether the argument is a good one or not.*

## Indicator Words

In an argumentative essay, such as those that you will be reading in this book, the paragraphs are an opportunity for the author to offer a somewhat self-contained argument. As noted earlier, each self-contained argument then may be intended to substantiate some larger position of the author. Premise and conclusion indicator words will often (but not always) help you distinguish the different parts of the arguments, as well as distinguish arguments from non-arguments. These useful words indicate or signal that there is a reason (or premise, evidence, justification, etc.) being offered in support of a viewpoint (or conclusion). Premise indicator words include: "Because," "Since," "Due to," "It follows from," etc. Conclusion indicators include: "Therefore," "Accordingly," "So," "Hence," "Thus," etc. Such words then will help you follow, and if necessary, reconstruct, the argument of the author. If there are no indicator words and you

suspect that you are dealing with some part of an argument, try inserting an indicator word of your choice to see if it makes sense.

## Other Things to Watch Out For

When trying to capture the author's argument, making notes in the margin is useful. For example, you might put a couple of words beside each paragraph that highlight the topic of the paragraph. Do not simply underline every word, since not everything the author will say will be significant and/or relevant to the main thesis. For example, the author might provide you with background factual information, editorial or introductory comments, and personal asides. See if the author defines the terms that they are using. This is important, since you want to make sure you actually *understand* their view before challenging it.

So, look for stipulative definitions whereby the author defines what they mean when they use a certain term (e.g., "By 'universal health care' I mean that everyone receives health care regardless of their ability to pay, regardless of where they live,

and regardless of the amount of responsibility or ‘blame-worthiness’ that they have for causing their own injury or illness.”). See if the author offers distinctions between his or her views and those of other authors (e.g., “It is a mistake to believe that a dualist shares the same views with all anti-materialists.”). As well, look for the use of other writers’ ideas, either as supporting evidence or as positions that the author wants to refute (e.g., “In 1993, Simonson argued (rightly/wrongly) that . . .”). At a later date, you may want to look up those references for your own essay.

## Reword the Main Arguments

Next, try to put the main arguments (the premises and the conclusions) of the paper in your own words. Make sure that what you believe the author is arguing for is in fact what the author intended. This is a crucial step because sometimes people will misinterpret what the author has written and then criticize them for the apparent views that they hold. This is known as committing the Straw Person Fallacy. Simply put, it is easy to criticize

someone for something when in fact it is you, not they, who stated it!

## Review What You Have Done

**Now, notice the steps you have taken so far:**

1. You have skimmed over the article to get a general sense of what it is about.
2. You have put the conclusion (or what you think is the conclusion) into your own words.
3. You have gone back to carefully re-read the article to draw out the various arguments that the author raises or rejects in his/her paper.
  - Remember, not everything that the author says is going to be a positive thesis. They will often argue against other people at the same time, attempting to show why their opponent's view is unsatisfactory and, subsequently, why their own views are right.
4. You have taken these points (many of which you have jotted down in the margins) and

listed them on a piece of paper.

Take a moment to look at what you have. Do you follow the flow of the paper? Perhaps you can draw arrows and diagrams connecting the various points. Do you understand what the author has said and why he/she has said it? If not, can you guess what you need to do? Yes, you should probably read it again, and if that fails, ask well-formed questions of your instructor or peers. For example, do not just say “I do not get it.” Try phrasing your question so that it not only includes information about where you are confused but also includes your own possible answer: “On page 34, the author states X, but I do not see how this fits with the conclusion Z. Is the author saying that X leads to Y and that Y leads to Z?”

**Once you understand the article, only then can you go back and evaluate it.**<sup>1</sup>

## Evaluation

So, for the sake of argument, let us assume that

you have a reasonable grasp on what the author is trying to ultimately convince you of. Now the question is, is the author successful in that goal? No one is saying you must accept or reject every single point made. Some arguments can still survive, even if you have cast doubt on some of the premises. Perhaps you like the argument in general but find a few weak areas that could be revised. Perhaps you think the argument is seriously flawed from the start. Whatever you believe, you will ultimately have to convince others of the same.

## Argument Types

Here is one approach that you can use to evaluate the author's position. Let us call it the "S-test." Are the premises *satisfactory* and do they *sufficiently support* the conclusion? First, you will want to isolate the premises that the author offers to defend their conclusions, and you will want to consider whether or not they are rationally acceptable. This means, amongst other things, that you will want to determine if each reason or

premise has been defended in a deductively sound or inductively strong sub-argument.

## Deductive Arguments

A deductively sound argument is an argument that is deductively valid and in which the premises are true. A deductively valid argument is one in which, *if* the premises are true, it would be impossible for the conclusion to be false. Notice that I have emphasized “if.” I am not saying that the premises are in fact true. We are only imagining that they are for the sake of analysis. You can have a valid but unsound argument but not a sound invalid argument. Deductive arguments are about guaranteeing the certainty of the conclusion. For example, if all humans are mortal and Jeff is a human, it **MUST** follow that Jeff is mortal. Replace the subject and the predicates in this argument with unknowns (e.g., X, Y, Z), and you can see that the conclusion still must follow: All X are Y and Z is an X, then Z is an X, too.

Here is another example. If I hold my breath for a long time, then I will pass out or gasp for air.

I do attempt to hold my breath for a long time... Can you guess what happens? I will pass out or gasp for air! You might say “Well, that’s common knowledge.” True, but look at the structure of the argument. If I am eighteen feet tall, then I can levitate dolphins. I tell you that I am eighteen feet tall. What do you know? You know that I can levitate dolphins. For deductive validity, it does not matter what the subject and the predicate are, since *it is the structure, not the content, that is important*. Soundness, on the other hand, is concerned with the content. First, the argument has to be checked for validity, and then we ask “Are the premises in fact true?” For if they are, we have a deductively sound argument. If they are not, then we just have a valid one. Thus, the “holding my breath” version of the “If A then B, A, therefore B” argument is sound, but the second version is only valid.

## Inductive Arguments

Inductive arguments are arguments that are evaluated in terms of “strength.” We use these

types of arguments to make empirical predictions or generalizations. They do not guarantee the conclusion; rather, they provide a degree of rational persuasion for the conclusion to be considered true. For example, if eight out of ten doctors tell you that you have the flu, then odds are that you probably have the flu. If, during the autumn months, you have noticed that the weather has been turning cooler, then tomorrow will be cooler still. These are inductively strong arguments, since the premises are good indicators for the conclusion to be true. Still, they might be wrong. You may in fact have some rare disease that mimics flu-like symptoms. The weather might turn unseasonably hot tomorrow. But if you were to deny the rational strength of these arguments, then you would not be able to function in life, let alone in a philosophy class.

## **Assessing an Argument**

The challenge, then, when you are assessing someone else's argument is to determine if they have provided you with premises and conclusions

that allow you to say they have given you good or bad arguments. Thus, arguments can go wrong in either two ways:

1. The premises may be unsatisfactory.
2. They may not support the conclusion appropriately.

## Are the Premises Satisfactory?

The premises can be determined to be satisfactory on any number of grounds. I hesitate to say, “the premises are true,” because although it is quite reasonable to claim, “No one has seen a unicorn lately,” I know some smart aleck will ask, “How do you know for sure? Have you asked everyone?” Well, no. I have not. So I cannot know *for sure*, since I have not checked. I cannot know *for certain* that it is true — though perhaps I can know for certain that this smart aleck is annoying...

If the premises are true by definition, or true by the meaning of the words alone, then we are safe. For example, claiming “Mammals give birth to their young alive” is true by definition. I do not need to

go and verify this claim by checking every mammal out there. Part of how we define “mammals” is by the fact that they give birth to their young alive. A claim such as “The square room next door has four corners” is known to be true by the very meaning of the word “square.” I do not need to go next door to count the number of corners in the square room to know that it has to be four. However, if the claim was “The room next door *is* square,” this *would* need to be verified.

The premises can be satisfactory by an appeal to common knowledge — not just common belief. There are lots of things that many people do believe or have believed that have turned out to be false: that the world was flat or that they will win this week’s lottery. There are lots of things that people believe that are controversial and, thus, open to debate: that slavery is acceptable or that flat taxation is just. And, finally, there are things that people believe that cannot be verified: that there is an afterlife or that if a tree falls in the forest it does (or does not) make a sound. In fact, what counts as “knowledge” will not be discussed here — for that, you should turn to the appropriate readings in the text.

The premises can be considered satisfactory if they have been successfully defended elsewhere by the author in a sub-argument or another article or by another person. They can be considered satisfactory if they are supported by a *proper* appeal to authority. This means that the person to whom you are referring is indeed an expert in the relevant area and that the experts in that area generally agree about the claim being made.

If, for some reason, you do not know if the premise is satisfactory, and you do not have evidence to suggest that it is unsatisfactory, then you may wish to provisionally accept it and move on to evaluate the author's other reasons (this is one reason why we hear people say "For argument's sake, let us assume that you are right."). However, if you do not understand the argument, do not use provisional acceptance as a way to justify your own intellectual laziness. Sometimes, understanding a point requires re-reading a particular paper or doing a bit of background investigation.

For example, if the arguer keeps talking about another person's argument, do you need to go find out for yourself what the original person said?

What is the context of the argument, and do you need to familiarize yourself with details on the surrounding issues? Just as it is inappropriate to walk in on another person's conversation and start arguing with them (e.g., Bob: ". . . and so as I was saying . . ." You, entering the room: "Hi Bob! You are wrong!"), it is academically inappropriate to start arguing against an author before you get the full story. *If you have to, do some research!*

Research does not have to be confined to the task of tracking down other lengthy books. You can try a philosophy encyclopaedia for good overviews of topics and philosophers. You can try a philosophy dictionary for help on terminology. You can talk to your peers. You can ask for directed assistance from your instructor, and so forth. Research in this sense is simply taking responsibility in finding out what you need to know in order to make a well-reasoned decision about the piece that you are evaluating.

# Do the Premises Support the Conclusion?

Once you have determined whether the premises themselves are satisfactory, the next stage of your evaluation will involve determining if the premises support the conclusion. In other words, are they positively relevant to the conclusion? To be “positively relevant,” the truth of the premise will count towards the truth of the conclusion. For example, the premise “It is sunny and warm today” is positively relevant to the conclusion “I should wear shorts and a T-shirt if I want to avoid being uncomfortable today.” Whereas the premise “All ravens are black” is not relevant to the same conclusion (namely, “I should wear shorts and a T-shirt if I want to avoid being uncomfortable today.”).

Only after determining if the reasons support to the conclusion may you then consider whether or not the author has provided *sufficient* support for you to rationally accept the conclusion. That the suspect hated the victim *supports* the claim that he killed the victim, but it clearly is not *sufficient support*. However, that the suspect voluntarily

confessed to the crime or that he left DNA and a home movie in which he is seen shooting the victim would probably convince the jury.

When determining if there is an appropriate and strong relationship between premises and conclusions, there are a few things one should consider.

Imagine someone said, "University courses are hard." They would require extensive argumentation to try and convince you of this claim. In fact, they would fail to do this because:

- The claim is ambiguous. Do they mean all university courses are hard or that some university courses are hard?
- Are they just claiming that all the courses that they have personally taken are hard?
- Are they using their personal experience of university courses to try and support the claim that university courses in general (i.e., even the ones they have not taken) are difficult?
- What do they mean by "hard?" Time consuming? Intellectually challenging? A combination of both?

After you point out these problems, you could then tell the person what they ARE able to conclude based upon the evidence provided. Are you trying to draw a generalization? Do they want to claim “All university courses are . . .” or “Most are . . .” or “Some are . . .”? Depending upon the scope of the proposition, that is, the quantity that is being referred to (i.e., few, some, many, most, all), then the number of examples offered needs to be appropriate. Clearly, if one wants to claim that “Most birds are black,” then there will need to be more examples of black birds given rather than fewer. But if the claim is “Some students are tall,” then just a handful of examples will suffice.

Backing away from a universal claim (e.g., “All dogs are friendly”) does not necessarily mean that you are giving a weaker argument. Indeed, it may be stronger. For if you state that, “All dogs are friendly,” then your opponent only needs to find one example of a dog that is not friendly to defeat your argument. However, if you say, “Most dogs are friendly,” then that one unfriendly dog does not hurt your position. You could respond: “I did not say ‘All dogs are friendly,’ nor did I say ‘THAT dog is friendly.’ I just said ‘most!’”

Another feature to watch for is the degree of certainty that is used in the proposition. Is the person claiming “I know for sure that there is a test next week,” or are they simply claiming “There might be a test next week”? The standard of the evidence for the former statement will be much more demanding than the latter. Again, you need to assess how much evidence there is to determine how strong a claim can be put forward. Obviously, you could (or may need to) weaken your claim, but then its persuasive effect will be lost. For example, which claim sounds more interesting: “The home team will win the championship,” or “There is a possibility that the home team might win the championship”? No one would probably (!) deny the second statement, because all the home team has to do is show up for the claim to be substantiated, so why waste your time (and theirs) arguing for such a point? So, while you may need to back down from being too confident in stating your conclusion, at the same time, you do not want to present a meek position when the evidence is clearly in your favour!

Finding satisfactory premises that supply sufficient support for a conclusion entails that you be actively engaged in critical thinking. And, as

mentioned at the outset, you cannot just read about how to develop these skills, because *in order to learn, you have to do*.

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# How to Write in Philosophy

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# How to Plan Your Philosophy Paper

## Introduction

It is early in the semester, and yet your instructor (whose name you probably do not even know how to spell correctly yet) may be already talking about the first essay that is not due for weeks, if not months, down the road. You might be tempted to wait until the very last minute to actually start writing it, but by then, five other assignments from your other classes are also due. Not a smart move, but understandable. It is only human nature to try and avoid doing those things that we do not like, whether it is doing homework or going to the dentist. Even if you receive a “B” on the paper, imagine what you could have received if you had spent more time on it!

What are the consequences of waiting until the very last minute? Well, on the positive side, you have managed to avoid doing something that you do not really want to do. But on the negative side,

you will lose a lot of sleep, skip a few early morning classes, be cranky and stressed, and ultimately submit a flawed piece of work that does not accurately represent what you think or what you are capable of. And you will probably get a poor grade, too.

What students often do not realize is that you really do not need to spend more time writing your paper, but you need to spend more time *planning* it.

Before we begin, let us make sure that we are on the same track. More often than not, a philosophy paper is a position or argumentative paper. It is not a “research paper.” A pure research paper involves (among other things) establishing, discovering or describing facts, such as medical facts, historical facts, or geopolitical facts. A position paper is just that: a paper in which you take or explain a position or point of view. You are trying to convince your reader of the thesis that you put forward.

In order to successfully persuade the reader of your own views, your instructor will be checking to see whether you adequately grasp the material and its implications, whether you can critically

analyze and evaluate the relevant issues, and whether you can reasonably defend your thesis.

A position paper should not be considered just an opportunity for stating your own opinions. Remember, opinions are philosophically uninteresting, since they simply are unsupported claims. They only tell the readers your personal attitude towards something, whereas what you want to do is rationally persuade someone that he or she should think the same way that you do. Although we are contrasting this process with a standard “research paper,” we are not saying that you do not do any research for your project. Research is a key element to find out more about your topic as well as the different views and arguments that people have offered regarding it. You will need to do research to first understand the topic, the surrounding issues, and implications. Then, you will need to do research to find out what other people think. Then, you will need to do research to support your own views. Doing all of this requires time — something you will sorely lack if you put the paper off until the last minute.

If there is any theme of this section, it is to stress the need to have enough time to devote to your

project. Let us repeat that again: GIVE YOUR ASSIGNMENT, YOUR TOPIC, AND YOUR READER THE TIME THEY DESERVE.

You need time to reflect and conduct research; time to reflect some more and put your ideas down on paper. You need time to walk away from those ideas and time to revisit them. You need time to dig around in libraries and the internet and then, armed with this additional input, alter, strengthen, and revise your work. You will then need more time to do the mechanical bits like editing, proofreading, and making sure that you have ink for your printer...

And, since time is important, let us get on to the main points, shall we?

## **Understand the Nature of the Assignment**

Your topic may be assigned to you, or you may be directed to choose a topic within certain parameters. Regardless of which approach is taken by your instructor, you must understand the topic

and the assignment requirements, for although you might write a competent paper, it might completely miss the point!

*Be sure you understand the instructions:*

- Are you asked to analyze a particular work or concept?
- Are you asked to summarize without evaluation?
- Are you asked to compare and contrast the positions of different philosophers or philosophies?
- How many words are required?
- Is it a short paper or a longer one?

Whatever the length, be mindful to stay close to the established limits. A paper that is too short will indicate that you did not spend adequate time to sufficiently develop and explore complex ideas. A paper that is too long may suffer from repetition or be “long winded” and defeat the purpose of the assignment (e.g., to be able to present material in a concise manner).

If you are unclear about the assigned essay topic, if you are unfamiliar with the topic background,

or if you are unsure about the philosophical terminology, look to the reference section of your library for a philosophy dictionary or encyclopaedia. This reading will also help you frame the topic within a larger context and has the potential to provide you with information to assist you when you actually start the formal writing process. *Do not simply turn to a standard dictionary, since those definitions will be inappropriate for your needs.* These “reportive” definitions are by their very nature brief (just try defining words like “justice” or “love” in four words or less!) and may suffer from a number of deficiencies, such as being too broad (i.e., they include things in the definition that ought not to be included, such as broadly defining the word “chair” as “a piece of furniture” — this does not distinguish between a chair and a table) or too narrow (i.e., they exclude things that ought to be included, such as narrowly defining the word “chair” as “a piece of furniture made out of yellow plastic” — this does not recognize that some chairs made out of brown wood).

If you are required to come up with your own essay topic, you should pick one after considering the following four guidelines.

## Pick Something That is Relevant

It sounds obvious, but sometimes students will get off track quickly and choose a topic that is not quite what the instructor wanted. This might be due to you not understanding the nature of the assignment or due to you choosing a topic that is too general or vague. It is wise to clear your topic with your instructor to see if you are on the right track. They will then be able to give you some further direction on what to do.

## Pick Something That You Are Interested In

They say time flies when you are having fun... While some topics may seem easier than others, do not let your initial impressions be the overriding factor. If you are not interested in the topic, then the actual writing process will become more difficult since you do not have anything vested in the project.

## Choose a Topic That Is “Doable”

Essay topics like “The Philosophy of Aristotle,” “What is Truth?” or “Science versus Religion” are far too broad in scope. When thinking about your topic, it is better that “the pond is small and deep, rather than wide and shallow.” That is a murky metaphor, but basically it means do not bite off more than you can chew. You do not want to touch on fifty different and disjointed points and say nothing substantial about any of them. Instead, you want to pick a manageable topic that allows you some room for an in-depth exploration of the particular issue. Are you keen on the topic of euthanasia? What aspect? Voluntary vs. non-voluntary? Active vs. passive? The role of family members as decision makers vs. the physician? Narrow your focus and develop your thoughts.

## Pick Something That You Can Find Materials On

While you may find a topic that interests you, you

should check to see what sorts of resources are available. You might struggle with arguments and ideas if you cannot find more than two or three pieces that only mention your topic in passing. Do not forget that content that you find on the internet can be posted by anyone (or any lobby group), so it may be biased, false, and misleading. Hence, the internet may be worse than no resource at all. Consult with your university librarian or instructor for suitable databases and website resources.

## **Make Preliminary Notes about the Topic from Your Own Perspective**

Once you have tentatively chosen a topic and have an understanding of it, try putting some of your own thoughts down on paper. Put your comments down as potential areas that you may want to explore later on. Just because you have chosen a topic does not necessarily mean that you already know what you think about it, let alone know what you want to say about it.

To do this, try and answer the following questions:

- What do you think about the topic?
- What do you want to say?
- What troubles you about this topic?
- What do you like about it?
- What do you find interesting or confusing?
- Do you see it leading to particular or general consequences?
- Can you think of any examples that highlight any of your concerns or which will highlight the claims being put forward by proponents of the particular position?
- Do you find that you seem to be in favour of one stance over another?
- Are you leaning in one direction but are not quite sure?

Just put your thoughts down on paper. This does not have to be any sort of formal presentation right now and by no means do these precursory comments have to be well-developed or even consistent with each other. You do not need to include every single point you have thought of, since some will just foster digressions. The challenge is to just get started. The mechanical

process of putting pen to paper — even if you are not sure what you want to say — will help you get you going.

## **Conduct Your First Search for Potential Sources**

After you have selected your topic and put down a few thoughts about it, you need to find out what material is out there. While you might think that the internet is the best place to go to see what sorts of resources are available, it is not the best place to start with. Look first to your own class text. It may contain a bibliography or a list of “recommended or further readings.” Does the author or editor have an introduction to the text or for each chapter? In the introduction, they might explicitly refer to other books or at least raise some discussion questions that can provide key terms that you can use for your searching. The book or article might mention other sources, like journals or some other texts, that you can go search for in your university’s library. Look at the footnotes or endnotes that are provided in the different

resources. These too will point you to other sources.

Remember, each source, whether it is an encyclopaedia, journal, book, anthology, index, glossary of terms or bibliography, has the potential to lead you to other sources. This process of using one reference to link to another is just the same as using hyperlinks on the internet. So, sit yourself down in the middle of the library stacks and start flipping through various journals and texts that you find on the shelves. You will be pleasantly surprised by what you can discover by just spending an hour digging around!

I should point out that if you have not taken a tour of your library yet, do so:

- Find out where things are.
- Find out how to look things up.
- Find out the locations of the reference books, the periodicals, and the photocopy machines.
- Ask questions.
- Ask for assistance.

Scout out the place before wasting any more time because otherwise you will be doing this every

time you have to return to the library to research a paper.

## Get Your Preliminary Sources Together

It is now time to get your readings together. You may find out later that some of the sources are not appropriate or quite what you need but, for now, gather a small collection together and start digging through them for applicability. Often, it does not take very long to figure out that a particular article is relevant or irrelevant to what you want. Read the table of contents, look at the author's introduction, and look at the index to see what key terms are mentioned frequently. Use those key terms to find other sources and then use *those* sources to find others, and so on. If you look up a book on a library shelf, look at all the others on the same shelf. If you found a useful article in a journal, look at previous issues and later ones (perhaps someone has written a rebuttal to the piece you like!)

While you can rely on the fact that the library books or journals that you are using are “quality” works, given that they were selected by someone to include in the university collection, remember to critically evaluate any work that you are considering using as support for your own views. This is even more pressing when you turn to the internet, where anyone can publish anything online. Fortunately, many people have taken the time to put together websites that list various resources for you to use. Your instructor may be able to direct you to some of these.

## **Understand and Critically Reflect Upon the Articles You Have Found**

Read the articles that you have selected. You need to be a bear (as in “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”) about your research now. You do not want too many references that overwhelm the project because you cannot tackle everything (remember the shallow pool metaphor from earlier?), and you do not want too few because you do not want

to just use the paper as a soapbox for your own ideas — no matter how marvellous they may be. You must understand the material before you can evaluate it. Make notes on your photocopies to capture ideas or quotes that you want to use and do not plagiarize! Take time to digest and reflect upon the information.

## **Create an Outline**

Go back to the ideas that you jotted down a while ago:

- Are there any common threads?
- Can you pull some of them together to form a roadmap of where you might want to go?
- Do the articles that you found offer new insights and leads?
- Do they answer any questions, or do they lead you to ask more?

Think of this process as teamwork. Many others have been down the road you are traveling before you and can offer suggestions on where to turn

and what to watch out for. Try to build on what they have done. Now is the time to create an outline of your arguments or, at a minimum, sketch out your ideas and construct an informal flow chart connecting this idea to that.

# **How to Write Your Philosophy Paper**

## **Introduction**

The process of writing a good philosophy paper can begin when you are evaluating the works of others; that is, you can learn by example. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, not all “classics” are good candidates for you to follow. What follows here are just a few suggestions on how to write your own paper. Of course, any requirements or recommendations of your instructor will take precedence over these instructions.

# Your Title

Although the first thing a reader will see is the title of your essay, the choice of title is perhaps best left for last. This is the case because a title should give a good indication as to the nature of the work — and you will have a better idea of what this is when the paper has been completed.

Why should the reader read your paper and not someone else's? Make the title informative but not too specific — it is a title not a wordy thesis statement. Feel free to personalize the title, but do not make it wildly outrageous!

Let us imagine that you are writing a paper in epistemology. One possible title would be: "Truth." Problematic? Definitely! "Truth" is far too generic and a bit pompous to boot. How about: "The Correspondence Theory of Truth." Better, but it is still too broad and it does not provide the reader with a sense of the paper's purpose. Consider instead: "The Correspondence Theory of Truth: A Defence." This is even better, since it gives the reader an indication as to what you are examining and hints at what your point of view will be. Of

course, it is not very sexy, but we leave that personalization up to you.

## Your Opening

Your opening paragraph(s) should set the stage for the rest of the paper. You are providing your reader with a contextual roadmap of what they can expect. It provides the reader with some indication as to why the topic is important, what the general problem is (or has been), and what your general thesis will be. If you have the space, you may wish to provide a brief glimpse of the main points you will be making — but be careful, because you do not want to spend a third of a short essay just explaining what the essay will be about.

Just like your title, you may want to write the first paragraph last. This is due to the fact that you may not be quite sure what direction the paper will ultimately take and what the various arguments will be. Thus, instead of trying to force your paper to comply with the limits that you set out in a poor opening paragraph, just sketch the start of your paper to begin with and then jump right into the

main text. Of course, the creation of an outline prior to this will benefit. Once you have written the first draft, then you can go back and tweak the opening paragraph.

## Your Text

While the opening sentence of each paragraph should be a new idea or an expansion of a previous one, it must flow naturally from the last sentence of the previous paragraph. Take care that you do not jump around from point to point without warning the reader — otherwise, the reader will be lost as to where you are going and what you are trying to accomplish. There are many different approaches to writing your essay, and sometimes, it just becomes a matter of what works best for you, the topic, and what your instructor wants. For example, you may want to present the issue, your views, and then the possible objections and your responses; or you may wish to develop these things all in tandem. That is, present an argument and a possible objection, and then resolve the criticism and move on.

The central sentences of each paragraph should provide details and expand the claim being made, while the final sentence will leave the reader with a strong sense of what this key point is, as well as set up the next paragraph. Paragraphs should not be overly long, however.

As a general rule, stronger arguments should be reserved for later on in your paper. Start with the more fragile or less significant ones first and then build up your case. You do not want to end on a weak note, since the last things you say will be the first things that the reader will remember. Do not be afraid to offer an *apparent* weak point — so long as you are able to recognize that it is a difficulty and are able to successfully respond to it.

For example, let us say your claim is that “any form of euthanasia is immoral and it should never be an institutionalized practice because physicians are in the business of curing people, not killing them.” One objection (and there would be many) might be the fact that this blanket prohibition means that there will be people who will be suffering needlessly: “Is it fair to force an elderly woman who is terminally ill to be in a constant state of pain until her death?” To this, you might reply that

not permitting euthanasia does not mean that we should stop caring for patients. Perhaps a new drug regimen can be put into practice to ease her pain, perhaps legalization of medicinal marijuana is needed, and so forth.

## **Your Conclusion**

Your conclusion should pull the pieces of your paper together for one final “send-off.” This is the last chance you have to grab the reader. The conclusion is used to restate your thesis and main arguments with reference to the specific concerns of your paper as well as to the general topic. It should complete what you started in such a fashion that the reader can walk away gaining some insight into what you were trying to do all along.

## **Your Paper’s Characteristics**

Let us assume you are writing a relatively long

argumentative paper. When constructing your paper, be sure that:

- The course concepts and presentation of others' views are clear and accurate.
- You attempt to be original.
- Any use of others' words or ideas directly or indirectly are clearly cited (see "How to Cite in Philosophy").
- The paper has correct spelling, punctuation, and diction and is expressed in appropriate formal language, including gender-neutral terminology.
- The paper is well-organized, and you do not digress. This organization should also be made clear to the reader.
- The paper clearly presents the issue it will discuss, and selects appropriate aspects of that issue for discussion.
- The paper is not too broad in attempting to answer "every problem" but deals with select elements in depth.
- The arguments are presented clearly, logically, and understandably.
- You take a definite position on the issue.
- The paper gives appropriate and convincing

- reasons for the position taken.
- The paper considers the viewpoints of others.
  - The paper gives appropriate reasons for rejecting these views.
  - The paper considers reasonable objections to its own positive argument, including any that were presented in class or found in assigned readings.
  - The arguments for rejecting these objections are clear and convincing.

## **Walk Away from Your Essay**

Once you have composed the first draft (yes, you will require more than one draft of your paper!), walk away from it! You need time to be able to shut off your goal-driven mind and re-examine your paper. This is because when you have been writing for extended periods of time you can lose your objectivity. For example, have you ever read one of your own essays over and over again and had a friend just glance at it once and spot typos that you never saw? This is because you are so used to what

you have written and are so intimate with the ideas that you can skim over all the mistakes.

This is also why, when reading the paper, it may be clear as day to you but to someone else it makes no sense. The reason for this is that you know what you wanted to say and you know what you mean and where you are going, but these things may not be adequately reflected by what actually appears in your paper. You want to avoid having to admit that “what I really meant to say here was . . .” Avoid it by coming back to your paper not as the writer of the piece, but as someone who is objective and disinterested. So, walk away and do something else.

## **Revisit and Revise Viciously!**

By taking the time to clear your head (at least one good night’s sleep!), you can return to your paper from a more objective point of view. You can see what you may have missed or what needs to be rewritten, deleted, or further defended. Often, reading the paper out loud can reveal any leaps

of logic, incongruities, digressions, and basic presentation problems.

When revisiting your paper, here are some of the things you should be checking for:

- Do you offer a clear thesis and tell the reader where you are going to take them? Do you take the reader where you said you would in the most effective manner?
- Do you state your arguments? Do you offer a credible defence of your arguments — not only by supplying your own reasons, but also the reasons of others?
- Do any of your claims that you use as justification require further justification themselves?
- Do you offer and consider other points of view? What have other people said both in favour and against the sorts of views that you are putting forward?
- Why should the reader accept your argument as opposed to the others that are out there (and which you may even discuss)?
- Do you consider their implications on your own position?
- Can you reasonably cast doubt on views that

- are inconsistent with your own?
- Can you see the implications of your view? Do you accept these implications?
  - Do you see any weaknesses with your theory?
  - Have you explicitly acknowledged any potential criticisms and attempted to meet them head on? Are these criticisms serious enough to require a wholesale review of your argument, or can you accept the weakness by altering your position within reasonable limits?
  - Are there areas that are ambiguous or vague? Are there any inconsistencies?
  - Have you committed any mistakes of reasoning?

## **Check Your Paper Manually before Handing It In**

You are almost done. After editing the content of your paper, and making sure that you have referenced correctly, check the mechanics. Run a spell-check program. If you have not done so already, print off a copy of your paper and

manually proofread it. Often, students will just do the former, but the spellchecker will not bring your attention to such errors as “These cent tents says dough not make scents.” By looking at your essay on paper rather than on your computer screen, you may catch obvious errors, unconnected paragraphs, and poor transitions that you might miss if you are only viewing it on the screen.

Now, do you see why we assign essays weeks in advance?

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# How to Cite in Philosophy

HUNTER AIKEN

## Chicago Style Tutorial

For information on citing in Chicago Manual of Style, check out the Chicago Style Tutorial by Brenda Smith (n.d.) (via the TRU Library).

# A Primer On Thought Experiments

HUNTER AIKEN

## **Table of Contents**

- What is a Thought Experiment?
- When and How to Use a Thought Experiment
- A Final Word on Thought Experiments
- How to Cite This Page

# What is a Thought Experiment?

A **thought experiment** is a cognitive tool that is deployed in order to:

- Understand our intuitions
- Test our consistency
- Reveal assumptions
- Question the principles underlying an argument or claim

Most often these cognitive tools take the shape of hypothetical scenarios, where we are asked to consider some imaginative scenario and provide an answer on what we think the right answer is. In doing so, we can clarify our thinking on certain topics, questions, and ideas to see where our philosophical commitments lay; or, we can develop a counterargument to the thought experiment and explain why it does not demonstrate what it says it does.

Ethics is a domain of philosophy that is ripe for the imaginative person to develop all sorts of unique

and crafty thought experiments. However, thought experiments are not only limited to philosophy and can be utilized in various areas of study to achieve similar goals that philosophers have in mind when they use them.

## When and How to Use a Thought Experiment

Although they provoke interesting questions and stimulate discussions, thought experiments require careful and critical thought before they can be used effectively. Remember — *thought experiments are not always counterfactuals to arguments*. While it may seem that a philosopher's argument can be easily refuted by a well developed thought experiment, the consequences of that thought experiment may be perfectly acceptable to them. In such a case, a philosopher may have already accepted the consequences of their view and is prepared to argue for them; hence, the thought experiment falls flat on its face.

In order to use a thought experiment successfully,

it must be able to show *why* it reveals a weakness in that philosopher's argument and *why* your solution is preferable to theirs. There needs to be an argument accompanying the thought experiment to show why the outcome is more preferable than the other philosopher's alternative. Thought experiments work best when used to show that the kinds of conclusions a philosopher's argument creates lead to inconsistencies or unethical views in their position.

Consider the following:

### **The Trolley Problem**

A train is moving down the track and fast approaching a split in the track. On one side is a person tied to the track, and on the other are five people on the track.

The train is currently on a path to hit and kill the five people on the track. In front of you is a lever that can divert the direction of the train the other way, where there is only one person tied on the track. Should you pull the lever?

Broadly speaking, those who are philosophically

committed to the ethical theory of Utilitarianism would say that you have a moral obligation to pull the lever to save the lives of five people. But now, consider the following thought experiment, which makes the Utilitarian answer to this thought experiment seem unethical:

A train is moving down the track and fast approaching a split in the track. The train is currently on a path to hit and kill the five people on the track. In order to save the lives of the five people, you must push an unknown bystander in front of the train to stop it from moving. Should you push the unknown bystander?

While it is possible the utilitarian might '*bite the bullet*' so to speak and push the bystander, we might wonder if it is truly ethical to directly harm other people in order to save the lives of others. Can we really say the Utilitarian theory offers us the right thing to do in this case, or might other ethical theories have better ways to solve this dilemma?

Thought experiments are abstract, but the principles and conclusions they lead us towards do

not need to be. If the above thought experiment shows that the Utilitarian is okay with harming the few to save the many, then what might they also say about the rights of minorities and immigrants against the majority when they conflict? Historical examples can also be used as more empirically based thought experiments to see what is at stake in certain ethical theories. The key point to remember here is that the importance of thought experiments is in their ability to take the underlying principle and generalize it to broader ethical concerns.

## **A Final Word on Thought Experiments**

As you read the various chapters in this book, you will encounter thought experiments that both support and reject the principles put forward by the philosophers in each chapter. Each one is designed to help you think more clearly and carefully about the arguments being put forward. Remember, thought experiments are great points

of discussion with others and are great fun when you can come up with your own and share them with others.

Check out the Absurd Trolley Problems game by Neal Agarwal to try out different varieties of the trolley problem, and see if you can explain why you would or would not pull the lever.

## How to Cite This Page

Aiken, Hunter. 2024. "A Primer on Thought Experiments." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/a-primer-on-thought-experiments/>.

PART II  
READINGS



# The Value of Philosophy

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# Introduction

Top

Many students study philosophy for a variety of different reasons, but when asked by others ‘*why do you study philosophy?*’ it can be difficult to formulate an answer to that question. The point of Russell’s essay is to help communicate what makes philosophy unique from other disciplines and to help us put words to that feeling that philosophy is a worthwhile pursuit (Russell 2017).

There are a few different moves in the argument that Russell makes. The first being to highlight what distinguishes philosophy from the rest of the academic disciplines. One unique feature of philosophy is that, according to Russell’s view, it is distinct from science because signs of progress and definite answers to questions are harder to gauge. In science, there are all kinds of empirical methods and research tools to help scientists arrive at some conclusive answers about questions. In contrast, philosophy, while in some cases drawing from the results of research, relies less on *experimentation* and more on *contemplation*

about questions that science cannot seem to answer (Russell 2017).

Russell (2017) thinks that a large part of the value of philosophy lay in this contemplation about such questions. By doing so, he thinks that we keep alive our sense of wonder about the world:

- It helps break free of everyday assumptions.
- Common-place objects become interesting.
- We get curious about the world and the people who inhabit it.
- It helps us to think impartially and for ourselves.

Philosophy encourages us not to make the world and others fit our own assumptions about it but to discard our assumptions and prejudices as we come to understand something more clearly. The value of philosophy thus lays in the benefit it produces for our minds and for our lives as a whole.

# Reading

[From *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy* (Bertrand 2017)]

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## **Bertrand Russell — On The Value of Philosophy**

...[It] will be well to consider...what is the value of philosophy and why it ought to be studied. It is the more necessary to consider this question, in view of the fact that many men, under the influence of science or of practical affairs, are inclined to doubt whether philosophy is anything better than innocent but useless trifling, hair-splitting distinctions, and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible.

This view of philosophy appears to result, partly from a wrong conception of the ends of life, partly from a wrong conception of the kind of goods which philosophy strives to achieve. Physical

science, through the medium of inventions, is useful to innumerable people who are wholly ignorant of it; thus the study of physical science is to be recommended, not only, or primarily, because of the effect on the student, but rather because of the effect on mankind in general. This utility does not belong to philosophy. If the study of philosophy has any value at all for others than students of philosophy, it must be only indirectly, through its effects upon the lives of those who study it. It is in these effects, therefore, if anywhere, that the value of philosophy must be primarily sought.

But further, if we are not to fail in our endeavour to determine the value of philosophy, we must first free our minds from the prejudices of what are wrongly called “practical” men. The “practical” man, as this word is often used, is one who recognizes only material needs, who realizes that men must have food for the body, but is oblivious of the necessity of providing food for the mind. If all men were well off, if poverty and disease had been reduced to their lowest possible point, there would still remain much to be done to produce a valuable society; and even in the existing world the goods of the mind are at least as important as the goods of

the body. It is exclusively among the goods of the mind that the value of philosophy is to be found; and only those who are not indifferent to these goods can be persuaded that the study of philosophy is not a waste of time.

Philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge. The knowledge it aims at is the kind of knowledge which gives unity and system to the body of the sciences, and the kind which results from a critical examination of the grounds of our convictions, prejudices, and beliefs. But it cannot be maintained that philosophy has had any very great measure of success in its attempts to provide definite answers to its questions. If you ask a mathematician, a mineralogist, a historian, or any other man of learning, what definite body of truths has been ascertained by his science, his answer will last as long as you are willing to listen. But if you put the same question to a philosopher, he will, if he is candid, have to confess that his study has not achieved positive results such as have been achieved by other sciences. It is true that this is partly accounted for by the fact that, as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science. The

whole study of the heavens, which now belongs to astronomy, was once included in philosophy; Newton's great work was called "the mathematical principles of natural philosophy." Similarly, the study of the human mind, which was, until very lately, a part of philosophy, has now been separated from philosophy and has become the science of psychology. Thus, to a great extent, the uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real: those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy.

This is, however, only a part of the truth concerning the uncertainty of philosophy. There are many questions—and among them those that are of the profoundest interest to our spiritual life—which, so far as we can see, must remain insoluble to the human intellect unless its powers become of quite a different order from what they are now. Has the universe any unity of plan or purpose, or is it a fortuitous concourse of atoms? Is consciousness a permanent part of the universe, giving hope of indefinite growth in wisdom, or is it a transitory accident on a small planet on which life must

ultimately become impossible? Are good and evil of importance to the universe or only to man? Such questions are asked by philosophy, and variously answered by various philosophers. But it would seem that, whether answers be otherwise discoverable or not, the answers suggested by philosophy are none of them demonstrably true. Yet, however slight may be the hope of discovering an answer, it is part of the business of philosophy to continue the consideration of such questions, to make us aware of their importance, to examine all the approaches to them, and to keep alive that speculative interest in the universe which is apt to be killed by confining ourselves to definitely ascertainable knowledge.

Many philosophers, it is true, have held that philosophy could establish the truth of certain answers to such fundamental questions. They have supposed that what is of most importance in religious beliefs could be proved by strict demonstration to be true. In order to judge of such attempts, it is necessary to take a survey of human knowledge, and to form an opinion as to its methods and its limitations. On such a subject it would be unwise to pronounce dogmatically; but if the investigations of our previous chapters have

not led us astray, we shall be compelled to renounce the hope of finding philosophical proofs of religious beliefs. We cannot, therefore, include as part of the value of philosophy any definite set of answers to such questions. Hence, once more, the value of philosophy must not depend upon any supposed body of definitely ascertainable knowledge to be acquired by those who study it.

The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find, as we saw in our opening chapters, that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest

many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.

Apart from its utility in showing unsuspected possibilities, philosophy has a value—perhaps its chief value—through the greatness of the objects which it contemplates, and the freedom from narrow and personal aims resulting from this contemplation. The life of the instinctive man is shut up within the circle of his private interests: family and friends may be included, but the outer world is not regarded except as it may help or hinder what comes within the circle of instinctive wishes. In such a life there is something feverish and confined, in comparison with which the philosophic life is calm and free. The private world of instinctive interests is a small one, set in the midst of a great and powerful world which must, sooner or later, lay our private world in ruins. Unless we can so enlarge our interests as to

include the whole outer world, we remain like a garrison in a beleaguered fortress, knowing that the enemy prevents escape and that ultimate surrender is inevitable. In such a life there is no peace, but a constant strife between the insistence of desire and the powerlessness of will. In one way or another, if our life is to be great and free, we must escape this prison and this strife.

One way of escape is by philosophic contemplation. Philosophic contemplation does not, in its widest survey, divide the universe into two hostile camps—friends and foes, helpful and hostile, good and bad—it views the whole impartially. Philosophic contemplation, when it is unalloyed, does not aim at proving that the rest of the universe is akin to man. All acquisition of knowledge is an enlargement of the Self, but this enlargement is best attained when it is not directly sought. It is obtained when the desire for knowledge is alone operative, by a study which does not wish in advance that its objects should have this or that character, but adapts the Self to the characters which it finds in its objects. This enlargement of Self is not obtained when, taking the Self as it is, we try to show that the world is so similar to this Self that knowledge of it is possible

without any admission of what seems alien. The desire to prove this is a form of self-assertion, and like all self-assertion, it is an obstacle to the growth of Self which it desires, and of which the Self knows that it is capable. Self-assertion, in philosophic speculation as elsewhere, views the world as a means to its own ends; thus it makes the world of less account than Self, and the Self sets bounds to the greatness of its goods. In contemplation, on the contrary, we start from the not-Self, and through its greatness the boundaries of Self are enlarged; through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity.

For this reason greatness of soul is not fostered by those philosophies which assimilate the universe to Man. Knowledge is a form of union of Self and not-Self; like all union, it is impaired by dominion, and therefore by any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves. There is a widespread philosophical tendency towards the view which tells us that man is the measure of all things, that truth is man-made, that space and time and the world of universals are properties of the mind, and that, if there be anything not created by the mind, it is unknowable

and of no account for us. This view, if our previous discussions were correct, is untrue; but in addition to being untrue, it has the effect of robbing philosophic contemplation of all that gives it value, since it fetters contemplation to Self. What it calls knowledge is not a union with the not-Self, but a set of prejudices, habits, and desires, making an impenetrable veil between us and the world beyond. The man who finds pleasure in such a theory of knowledge is like the man who never leaves the domestic circle for fear his word might not be law.

The true philosophic contemplation, on the contrary, finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating. Everything, in contemplation, that is personal or private, everything that depends upon habit, self-interest, or desire, distorts the object, and hence impairs the union which the intellect seeks. By thus making a barrier between subject and object, such personal and private things become a prison to the intellect. The free intellect will see as God might see, without a *here* and *now*, without hopes and fears, without the trammels of customary beliefs and traditional

prejudices, calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge—knowledge as impersonal, as purely contemplative, as it is possible for man to attain. Hence also the free intellect will value more the abstract and universal knowledge into which the accidents of private history do not enter, than the knowledge brought by the senses, and dependent, as such knowledge must be, upon an exclusive and personal point of view and a body whose sense-organs distort as much as they reveal.

The mind which has become accustomed to the freedom and impartiality of philosophic contemplation will preserve something of the same freedom and impartiality in the world of action and emotion. It will view its purposes and desires as parts of the whole, with the absence of insistence that results from seeing them as infinitesimal fragments in a world of which all the rest is unaffected by any one man's deeds. The impartiality which, in contemplation, is the unalloyed desire for truth, is the very same quality of mind which, in action, is justice, and in emotion is that universal love which can be given to all, and not only to those who are judged useful or admirable. Thus contemplation enlarges not only

the objects of our thoughts, but also the objects of our actions and our affections: it makes us citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with all the rest. In this citizenship of the universe consists man's true freedom, and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears.

Thus, to sum up our discussion of the value of philosophy: Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination, and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.

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# Discussion Questions

1. After reading Russell's essay, were some of the reasons he listed for the value of philosophy why you decided to take a philosophy course? Why or why not?
2. What distinction does Russell make between philosophy and other academic pursuits? What makes it unique?
3. What do you think the benefits of studying philosophy are? Do you agree with Russell that studying philosophy is not about the answers but the richness of the questions?
4. Russell describes philosophy as form of impartial contemplation free and untrammelled by everyday prejudices, opinions, or biases. Do you agree with this view? Why or why not?
5. In Russell's view, how does philosophical contemplation broaden our horizons to make us

citizens of the universe rather than  
citizens of a particular locality?

# Thought Experiments

## **Ignorance is Bliss?**

Imagine a society where philosophical questioning is forbidden and everyone is taught to accept certain truths without question. People live contentedly within these accepted truths but never explore beyond them. Now, suppose someone, like yourself, who has explored philosophical questions arrives in this society. What would such a society look like from your perspective?

## **Philosophia Ex Machina**

Suppose there is a robot philosopher that can provide perfectly logical answers to any question based on pre-

programmed knowledge. However, this robot cannot question its own programming or the fundamental nature of reality. Compare the robot's way of thinking with a human philosopher who constantly questions and seeks to understand the underlying principles of existence.

### **Absolute Certainty**

Imagine you live on an island where every answer to every question is known with absolute certainty. There is no room for doubt or uncertainty. How would this affect your sense of curiosity, wonder, and intellectual growth? Would you feel fulfilled, or would you

yearn for the unknown and the mysterious?

## Further Reading

- “Introduction” from *Introduction to Ethics* by Hunter Aiken and Calum McCracken (2024)
- *How to Read, Write, and Cite in Philosophy* by Jeff McLaughlin (2017)
- “A Primer on Thought Experiments” by Hunter Aiken (2024)

<https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/a-primer-on-thought-experiments/>

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Russel, Bertrand. 2017. “Bertrand Russel – On the

Value of Philosophy." In *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy*, edited by Jeff McLaughlin. Victoria, BC: BCCampus; Kamloops, BC: Thompson Rivers University. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/classicreadings/chapter/bertrand-russell-on-the-value-of-philosophy/>.

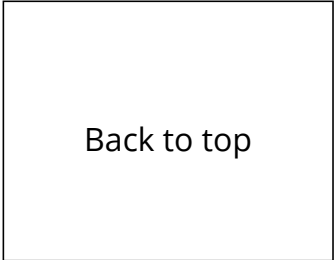
## How to Cite This Page

Aiken, Hunter. 2024. "The Value of Philosophy." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/the-value-of-philosophy/>

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# Contractarianism

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## Introduction

Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is grounded in a less than charitable view of human nature, by which war and chaos are the consequence of our *natural passions* in the absence of a visible power to temper them. In Hobbes's view, we must divest ourselves of our absolute autonomy that occurs in this *state of nature* to achieve a peaceful coexistence — to be administered over in virtual totality by the sovereign (Hobbes 2017).

The rights of the sovereign are exhaustive, existing as both the foundation of 'truth' and the embodiment of unquestionable authority. It is here that the *biblical leviathan* becomes an apt rhetorical device for Hobbes's theory of civil

administration; it is a great beast that subdues the pride of men, answerable only to God — whereas the subject under such a regime is protected by thread-bare *laws of nature* that merely sanction the preservation of one’s life. The dangers of this power dynamic are obvious and even acknowledged by Hobbes himself, yet he provides no satisfying answer to this dilemma (Hobbes 2017).

Hobbes maintained, as he put it in the preface to *Leviathan*, that he felt compelled “... to set before men’s eyes the mutual relation between protection and obedience.” To that end, Hobbes’s work serves as a useful guide to understanding our own civic obligations and the liberties we relinquish to live amongst each other in harmony (Hobbes 2017).

## Reading

[From *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy* (Hobbes 2017)]

# Thomas Hobbes — Leviathan

## Chapter XIII: Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery

Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself.

And as to the faculties of the mind, setting aside the arts grounded upon words, and especially that skill of proceeding upon general and infallible rules, called science, which very few have and but

in few things, as being not a native faculty born with us, nor attained, as prudence, while we look after somewhat else, I find yet a greater equality amongst men than that of strength. For prudence is but experience, which equal time equally bestows on all men in those things they equally apply themselves unto. That which may perhaps make such equality incredible is but a vain conceit of one's own wisdom, which almost all men think they have in a greater degree than the vulgar; that is, than all men but themselves, and a few others, whom by fame, or for concurring with themselves, they approve. For such is the nature of men that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent or more learned, yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves; for they see their own wit at hand, and other men's at a distance. But this proveth rather that men are in that point equal, than unequal. For there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of anything than that every man is contented with his share.

From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become

enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavour to destroy or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass that where an invader hath no more to fear than another man's single power, if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another.

And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: and this is no more than his own conservation requireth, and is generally allowed. Also, because there be some that, taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires, if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on

their defence, to subsist. And by consequence, such augmentation of dominion over men being necessary to a man's conservation, it ought to be allowed him.

Again, men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there is no power able to overawe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself, and upon all signs of contempt or undervaluing naturally endeavours, as far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet is far enough to make them destroy each other), to extort a greater value from his contemnners, by damage; and from others, by the example.

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory.

The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a

word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man. For war consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of time is to be considered in the nature of war, as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather lieth not in a shower or two of rain, but in an inclination thereto of many days together: so the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is peace.

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place

for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

It may seem strange to some man that has not well weighed these things that Nature should thus dissociate and render men apt to invade and destroy one another: and he may therefore, not trusting to this inference, made from the passions, desire perhaps to have the same confirmed by experience. Let him therefore consider with himself: when taking a journey, he arms himself and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there be laws and public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done him; what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow citizens, when he locks his doors; and of his children, and servants, when he locks his

chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions as I do by my words? But neither of us accuse man's nature in it. The desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions that proceed from those passions till they know a law that forbids them; which till laws be made they cannot know, nor can any law be made till they have agreed upon the person that shall make it.

It may peradventure be thought there was never such a time nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all, and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before. Howsoever, it may be perceived what manner of life there would be, where there were no common power to fear, by the manner of life which men that have formerly lived under a peaceful government use to degenerate into a civil war.

But though there had never been any time wherein particular men were in a condition of war one

against another, yet in all times kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbours, which is a posture of war. But because they uphold thereby the industry of their subjects, there does not follow from it that misery which accompanies the liberty of particular men.

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition that there be no propriety, no dominion, no mine and thine distinct; but only that to be every man's that he

can get, and for so long as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition which man by mere nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his reason.

The passions that incline men to peace are: fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These articles are they which otherwise are called the laws of nature, whereof I shall speak more particularly in the two following chapters.

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## Chapter XIV: Of the First and Second Natural Laws, and of

## Contracts

The right of nature, which writers commonly call *jus naturale*, is the liberty each man hath to use his

own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything which, in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.

By liberty is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments; which impediments may oft take away part of a man's power to do what he would, but cannot hinder him from using the power left him according as his judgement and reason shall dictate to him.

A law of nature, *lex naturalis*, is a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved. For though they that speak of this subject use to confound *jus* and *lex*, right and law, yet they ought to be distinguished, because right consisteth in liberty to do, or to forbear; whereas law determineth and bindeth to one of them: so that law and right differ as much as obligation and liberty, which in one and the same matter are inconsistent.

And because the condition of man (as hath been declared in the precedent chapter) is a condition of war of every one against every one, in which case every one is governed by his own reason, and there is nothing he can make use of that may not be a help unto him in preserving his life against his enemies; it followeth that in such a condition every man has a right to every thing, even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live.

And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason: that every man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war. The first branch of which rule containeth the first and fundamental law of nature, which is: to seek peace and follow it. The second, the sum of the right of nature, which is: by all means we can to defend ourselves.

From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavour peace, is derived this second law: that a man be willing,

when others are so too, as far forth as for peace and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself. For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing anything he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war. But if other men will not lay down their right, as well as he, then there is no reason for anyone to divest himself of his: for that were to expose himself to prey, which no man is bound to, rather than to dispose himself to peace. This is that law of the gospel: Whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them. And that law of all men, *quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris*.

To lay down a man's right to anything is to divest himself of the liberty of hindering another of the benefit of his own right to the same. For he that renounceth or passeth away his right giveth not to any other man a right which he had not before, because there is nothing to which every man had not right by nature, but only standeth out of his way that he may enjoy his own original right without hindrance from him, not without hindrance from another. So that the effect which

redoundeth to one man by another man's defect of right is but so much diminution of impediments to the use of his own right original.

Right is laid aside, either by simply renouncing it, or by transferring it to another. By simply renouncing, when he cares not to whom the benefit thereof redoundeth. By transferring, when he intendeth the benefit thereof to some certain person or persons. And when a man hath in either manner abandoned or granted away his right, then is he said to be obliged, or bound, not to hinder those to whom such right is granted, or abandoned, from the benefit of it: and that he ought, and it is duty, not to make void that voluntary act of his own: and that such hindrance is injustice, and injury, as being sine jure; the right being before renounced or transferred. So that injury or injustice, in the controversies of the world, is somewhat like to that which in the disputations of scholars is called absurdity. For as it is there called an absurdity to contradict what one maintained in the beginning; so in the world it is called injustice, and injury voluntarily to undo that which from the beginning he had voluntarily done. The way by which a man either simply renounceth or transferreth his right is a declaration, or signification, by some voluntary

and sufficient sign, or signs, that he doth so renounce or transfer, or hath so renounced or transferred the same, to him that accepteth it. And these signs are either words only, or actions only; or, as it happeneth most often, both words and actions. And the same are the bonds, by which men are bound and obliged: bonds that have their strength, not from their own nature (for nothing is more easily broken than a man's word), but from fear of some evil consequence upon the rupture.

Whensoever a man transferreth his right, or renounceth it, it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself, or for some other good he hopeth for thereby. For it is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself. And therefore there be some rights which no man can be understood by any words, or other signs, to have abandoned or transferred. As first a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them that assault him by force to take away his life, because he cannot be understood to aim thereby at any good to himself. The same may be said of wounds, and chains, and imprisonment, both because there is no benefit consequent to such patience, as there is to the patience of suffering another to be

wounded or imprisoned, as also because a man cannot tell when he seeth men proceed against him by violence whether they intend his death or not. And lastly the motive and end for which this renouncing and transferring of right is introduced is nothing else but the security of a man's person, in his life, and in the means of so preserving life as not to be weary of it. And therefore if a man by words, or other signs, seem to despoil himself of the end for which those signs were intended, he is not to be understood as if he meant it, or that it was his will, but that he was ignorant of how such words and actions were to be interpreted.

The mutual transferring of right is that which men call contract.

There is difference between transferring of right to the thing, and transferring or tradition, that is, delivery of the thing itself. For the thing may be delivered together with the translation of the right, as in buying and selling with ready money, or exchange of goods or lands, and it may be delivered some time after.

Again, one of the contractors may deliver the thing contracted for on his part, and leave the other to

perform his part at some determinate time after, and in the meantime be trusted; and then the contract on his part is called pact, or covenant: or both parts may contract now to perform hereafter, in which cases he that is to perform in time to come, being trusted, his performance is called keeping of promise, or faith, and the failing of performance, if it be voluntary, violation of faith.

When the transferring of right is not mutual, but one of the parties transferreth in hope to gain thereby friendship or service from another, or from his friends; or in hope to gain the reputation of charity, or magnanimity; or to deliver his mind from the pain of compassion; or in hope of reward in heaven; this is not contract, but gift, free gift, grace: which words signify one and the same thing.

Signs of contract are either express or by inference. Express are words spoken with understanding of what they signify: and such words are either of the time present or past; as, I give, I grant, I have given, I have granted, I will that this be yours: or of the future; as, I will give, I will grant, which words of the future are called promise.

Signs by inference are sometimes the consequence of words; sometimes the consequence of silence; sometimes the consequence of actions; sometimes the consequence of forbearing an action: and generally a sign by inference, of any contract, is whatsoever sufficiently argues the will of the contractor.

Words alone, if they be of the time to come, and contain a bare promise, are an insufficient sign of a free gift and therefore not obligatory. For if they be of the time to come, as, tomorrow I will give, they are a sign I have not given yet, and consequently that my right is not transferred, but remaineth till I transfer it by some other act. But if the words be of the time present, or past, as, I have given, or do give to be delivered tomorrow, then is my tomorrow's right given away today; and that by the virtue of the words, though there were no other argument of my will. And there is a great difference in the signification of these words, *volo hoc tuum esse cras*, and *cras dabo*; that is, between I will that this be thine tomorrow, and, I will give it thee tomorrow: for the word I will, in the former manner of speech, signifies an act of the will present; but in the latter, it signifies a promise of

an act of the will to come: and therefore the former words, being of the present, transfer a future right; the latter, that be of the future, transfer nothing. But if there be other signs of the will to transfer a right besides words; then, though the gift be free, yet may the right be understood to pass by words of the future: as if a man propound a prize to him that comes first to the end of a race, the gift is free; and though the words be of the future, yet the right passeth: for if he would not have his words so be understood, he should not have let them run.

In contracts the right passeth, not only where the words are of the time present or past, but also where they are of the future, because all contract is mutual translation, or change of right; and therefore he that promiseth only, because he hath already received the benefit for which he promiseth, is to be understood as if he intended the right should pass: for unless he had been content to have his words so understood, the other would not have performed his part first. And for that cause, in buying, and selling, and other acts of contract, a promise is equivalent to a covenant, and therefore obligatory.

He that performeth first in the case of a contract

is said to merit that which he is to receive by the performance of the other, and he hath it as due. Also when a prize is propounded to many, which is to be given to him only that winneth, or money is thrown amongst many to be enjoyed by them that catch it; though this be a free gift, yet so to win, or so to catch, is to merit, and to have it as due. For the right is transferred in the propounding of the prize, and in throwing down the money, though it be not determined to whom, but by the event of the contention. But there is between these two sorts of merit this difference, that in contract I merit by virtue of my own power and the contractor's need, but in this case of free gift I am enabled to merit only by the benignity of the giver: in contract I merit at the contractor's hand that he should depart with his right; in this case of gift, I merit not that the giver should part with his right, but that when he has parted with it, it should be mine rather than another's. And this I think to be the meaning of that distinction of the Schools between *meritum congrui* and *meritum condigni*. For God Almighty, having promised paradise to those men, hoodwinked with carnal desires, that can walk through this world according to the precepts and limits prescribed by him, they say he

that shall so walk shall merit paradise ex congruo. But because no man can demand a right to it by his own righteousness, or any other power in himself, but by the free grace of God only, they say no man can merit paradise ex condigno. This, I say, I think is the meaning of that distinction; but because disputers do not agree upon the signification of their own terms of art longer than it serves their turn, I will not affirm anything of their meaning: only this I say; when a gift is given indefinitely, as a prize to be contended for, he that winneth meriteth, and may claim the prize as due.

If a covenant be made wherein neither of the parties perform presently, but trust one another, in the condition of mere nature (which is a condition of war of every man against every man) upon any reasonable suspicion, it is void: but if there be a common power set over them both, with right and force sufficient to compel performance, it is not void. For he that performeth first has no assurance the other will perform after, because the bonds of words are too weak to bridle men's ambition, avarice, anger, and other passions, without the fear of some coercive power; which in the condition of mere nature, where all men are equal, and judges of the justness of their

own fears, cannot possibly be supposed. And therefore he which performeth first does but betray himself to his enemy, contrary to the right he can never abandon of defending his life and means of living.

But in a civil estate, where there is a power set up to constrain those that would otherwise violate their faith, that fear is no more reasonable; and for that cause, he which by the covenant is to perform first is obliged so to do.

The cause of fear, which maketh such a covenant invalid, must be always something arising after the covenant made, as some new fact or other sign of the will not to perform, else it cannot make the covenant void. For that which could not hinder a man from promising ought not to be admitted as a hindrance of performing.

He that transferreth any right transferreth the means of enjoying it, as far as lieth in his power. As he that selleth land is understood to transfer the herbage and whatsoever grows upon it; nor can he that sells a mill turn away the stream that drives it. And they that give to a man the right of government in sovereignty are understood to

give him the right of levying money to maintain soldiers, and of appointing magistrates for the administration of justice.

To make covenants with brute beasts is impossible, because not understanding our speech, they understand not, nor accept of any translation of right, nor can translate any right to another: and without mutual acceptance, there is no covenant.

To make covenant with God is impossible but by mediation of such as God speaketh to, either by revelation supernatural or by His lieutenants that govern under Him and in His name: for otherwise we know not whether our covenants be accepted or not. And therefore they that vow anything contrary to any law of nature, vow in vain, as being a thing unjust to pay such vow. And if it be a thing commanded by the law of nature, it is not the vow, but the law that binds them.

The matter or subject of a covenant is always something that falleth under deliberation, for to covenant is an act of the will; that is to say, an act, and the last act, of deliberation; and is therefore always understood to be something to come, and

which judged possible for him that covenanteth to perform.

And therefore, to promise that which is known to be impossible is no covenant. But if that prove impossible afterwards, which before was thought possible, the covenant is valid and bindeth, though not to the thing itself, yet to the value; or, if that also be impossible, to the unfeigned endeavour of performing as much as is possible, for to more no man can be obliged.

Men are freed of their covenants two ways; by performing, or by being forgiven. For performance is the natural end of obligation, and forgiveness the restitution of liberty, as being a retransferring of that right in which the obligation consisted.

Covenants entered into by fear, in the condition of mere nature, are obligatory. For example, if I covenant to pay a ransom, or service for my life, to an enemy, I am bound by it. For it is a contract, wherein one receiveth the benefit of life; the other is to receive money, or service for it, and consequently, where no other law (as in the condition of mere nature) forbiddeth the performance, the covenant is valid. Therefore

prisoners of war, if trusted with the payment of their ransom, are obliged to pay it: and if a weaker prince make a disadvantageous peace with a stronger, for fear, he is bound to keep it; unless (as hath been said before) there ariseth some new and just cause of fear to renew the war. And even in Commonwealths, if I be forced to redeem myself from a thief by promising him money, I am bound to pay it, till the civil law discharge me. For whatsoever I may lawfully do without obligation, the same I may lawfully covenant to do through fear: and what I lawfully covenant, I cannot lawfully break.

A former covenant makes void a later. For a man that hath passed away his right to one man today hath it not to pass tomorrow to another: and therefore the later promise passeth no right, but is null.

A covenant not to defend myself from force, by force, is always void. For (as I have shown before) no man can transfer or lay down his right to save himself from death, wounds, and imprisonment, the avoiding whereof is the only end of laying down any right; and therefore the promise of not resisting force, in no covenant transferreth any

right, nor is obliging. For though a man may covenant thus, unless I do so, or so, kill me; he cannot covenant thus, unless I do so, or so, I will not resist you when you come to kill me. For man by nature chooseth the lesser evil, which is danger of death in resisting, rather than the greater, which is certain and present death in not resisting. And this is granted to be true by all men, in that they lead criminals to execution, and prison, with armed men, notwithstanding that such criminals have consented to the law by which they are condemned.

A covenant to accuse oneself, without assurance of pardon, is likewise invalid. For in the condition of nature where every man is judge, there is no place for accusation: and in the civil state the accusation is followed with punishment, which, being force, a man is not obliged not to resist. The same is also true of the accusation of those by whose condemnation a man falls into misery; as of a father, wife, or benefactor. For the testimony of such an accuser, if it be not willingly given, is presumed to be corrupted by nature, and therefore not to be received: and where a man's testimony is not to be credited, he is not bound to give it. Also accusations upon torture are not to be

reputed as testimonies. For torture is to be used but as means of conjecture, and light, in the further examination and search of truth: and what is in that case confessed tendeth to the ease of him that is tortured, not to the informing of the torturers, and therefore ought not to have the credit of a sufficient testimony: for whether he deliver himself by true or false accusation, he does it by the right of preserving his own life.

The force of words being (as I have formerly noted) too weak to hold men to the performance of their covenants, there are in man's nature but two imaginable helps to strengthen it. And those are either a fear of the consequence of breaking their word, or a glory or pride in appearing not to need to break it. This latter is a generosity too rarely found to be presumed on, especially in the pursuers of wealth, command, or sensual pleasure, which are the greatest part of mankind. The passion to be reckoned upon is fear; whereof there be two very general objects: one, the power of spirits invisible; the other, the power of those men they shall therein offend. Of these two, though the former be the greater power, yet the fear of the latter is commonly the greater fear. The fear of the former is in every man his own religion,

which hath place in the nature of man before civil society. The latter hath not so; at least not place enough to keep men to their promises, because in the condition of mere nature, the inequality of power is not discerned, but by the event of battle. So that before the time of civil society, or in the interruption thereof by war, there is nothing can strengthen a covenant of peace agreed on against the temptations of avarice, ambition, lust, or other strong desire, but the fear of that invisible power which they every one worship as God, and fear as a revenger of their perfidy. All therefore that can be done between two men not subject to civil power is to put one another to swear by the God he feareth: which swearing, or oath, is a form of speech, added to a promise, by which he that promiseth signifieth that unless he perform he renounceth the mercy of his God, or calleth to him for vengeance on himself. Such was the heathen form, Let Jupiter kill me else, as I kill this beast. So is our form, I shall do thus, and thus, so help me God. And this, with the rites and ceremonies which every one useth in his own religion, that the fear of breaking faith might be the greater.

By this it appears that an oath taken according to any other form, or rite, than his that sweareth is

in vain and no oath, and that there is no swearing by anything which the swearer thinks not God. For though men have sometimes used to swear by their kings, for fear, or flattery; yet they would have it thereby understood they attributed to them divine honour. And that swearing unnecessarily by God is but profaning of his name: and swearing by other things, as men do in common discourse, is not swearing, but an impious custom, gotten by too much vehemence of talking.

It appears also that the oath adds nothing to the obligation. For a covenant, if lawful, binds in the sight of God, without the oath, as much as with it; if unlawful, bindeth not at all, though it be confirmed with an oath.

## Chapter XV: Of Other Laws of Nature



From that law of nature by which we are obliged to transfer to another such rights as, being retained, hinder the peace of mankind, there followeth a

third; which is this: that men perform their covenants made; without which covenants are in vain, and but empty words; and the right of all men to all things remaining, we are still in the condition of war.

And in this law of nature consisteth the fountain and original of justice. For where no covenant hath preceded, there hath no right been transferred, and every man has right to everything and consequently, no action can be unjust. But when a covenant is made, then to break it is unjust and the definition of injustice is no other than the not performance of covenant. And whatsoever is not unjust is just.

But because covenants of mutual trust, where there is a fear of not performance on either part (as hath been said in the former chapter), are invalid, though the original of justice be the making of covenants, yet injustice actually there can be none till the cause of such fear be taken away; which, while men are in the natural condition of war, cannot be done. Therefore before the names of just and unjust can have place, there must be some coercive power to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror

of some punishment greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant, and to make good that propriety which by mutual contract men acquire in recompense of the universal right they abandon: and such power there is none before the erection of a Commonwealth. And this is also to be gathered out of the ordinary definition of justice in the Schools, for they say that justice is the constant will of giving to every man his own. And therefore where there is no own, that is, no propriety, there is no injustice; and where there is no coercive power erected, that is, where there is no Commonwealth, there is no propriety, all men having right to all things: therefore where there is no Commonwealth, there nothing is unjust. So that the nature of justice consisteth in keeping of valid covenants, but the validity of covenants begins not but with the constitution of a civil power sufficient to compel men to keep them: and then it is also that propriety begins.

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no such thing as justice, and sometimes also with his tongue, seriously alleging that every man's conservation and contentment being committed to his own care, there could be no reason why every

man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore also to make, or not make; keep, or not keep, covenants was not against reason when it conduced to one's benefit. He does not therein deny that there be covenants; and that they are sometimes broken, sometimes kept; and that such breach of them may be called injustice, and the observance of them justice: but he questioneth whether injustice, taking away the fear of God (for the same fool hath said in his heart there is no God), may not sometimes stand with that reason which dictateth to every man his own good; and particularly then, when it conduceth to such a benefit as shall put a man in a condition to neglect not only the dispraise and revilings, but also the power of other men. The kingdom of God is gotten by violence: but what if it could be gotten by unjust violence? Were it against reason so to get it, when it is impossible to receive hurt by it? And if it be not against reason, it is not against justice: or else justice is not to be approved for good. From such reasoning as this, successful wickedness hath obtained the name of virtue: and some that in all other things have disallowed the violation of faith, yet have allowed it when it is for the getting of a kingdom. And the heathen that believed that

Saturn was deposed by his son Jupiter believed nevertheless the same Jupiter to be the avenger of injustice, somewhat like to a piece of law in Coke's Commentaries on Littleton; where he says if the right heir of the crown be attainted of treason, yet the crown shall descend to him, and eo instante the attainer be void: from which instances a man will be very prone to infer that when the heir apparent of a kingdom shall kill him that is in possession, though his father, you may call it injustice, or by what other name you will; yet it can never be against reason, seeing all the voluntary actions of men tend to the benefit of themselves; and those actions are most reasonable that conduce most to their ends. This specious reasoning is nevertheless false.

For the question is not of promises mutual, where there is no security of performance on either side, as when there is no civil power erected over the parties promising; for such promises are no covenants: but either where one of the parties has performed already, or where there is a power to make him perform, there is the question whether it be against reason; that is, against the benefit of the other to perform, or not. And I say it is not against reason. For the manifestation whereof we

are to consider; first, that when a man doth a thing, which notwithstanding anything can be foreseen and reckoned on tendeth to his own destruction, howsoever some accident, which he could not expect, arriving may turn it to his benefit; yet such events do not make it reasonably or wisely done. Secondly, that in a condition of war, wherein every man to every man, for want of a common power to keep them all in awe, is an enemy, there is no man can hope by his own strength, or wit, to himself from destruction without the help of confederates; where every one expects the same defence by the confederation that any one else does: and therefore he which declares he thinks it reason to deceive those that help him can in reason expect no other means of safety than what can be had from his own single power. He, therefore, that breaketh his covenant, and consequently declareth that he thinks he may with reason do so, cannot be received into any society that unite themselves for peace and defence but by the error of them that receive him; nor when he is received be retained in it without seeing the danger of their error; which errors a man cannot reasonably reckon upon as the means of his security: and therefore if he be left, or cast out of society, he

perisheth; and if he live in society, it is by the errors of other men, which he could not foresee nor reckon upon, and consequently against the reason of his preservation; and so, as all men that contribute not to his destruction forbear him only out of ignorance of what is good for themselves.

As for the instance of gaining the secure and perpetual felicity of heaven by any way, it is frivolous; there being but one way imaginable, and that is not breaking, but keeping of covenant.

And for the other instance of attaining sovereignty by rebellion; it is manifest that, though the event follow, yet because it cannot reasonably be expected, but rather the contrary, and because by gaining it so, others are taught to gain the same in like manner, the attempt thereof is against reason. Justice therefore, that is to say, keeping of covenant, is a rule of reason by which we are forbidden to do anything destructive to our life, and consequently a law of nature.

There be some that proceed further and will not have the law of nature to be those rules which conduce to the preservation of man's life on earth, but to the attaining of an eternal felicity after

death; to which they think the breach of covenant may conduce, and consequently be just and reasonable; such are they that think it a work of merit to kill, or depose, or rebel against the sovereign power constituted over them by their own consent. But because there is no natural knowledge of man's estate after death, much less of the reward that is then to be given to breach of faith, but only a belief grounded upon other men's saying that they know it supernaturally or that they know those that knew them that knew others that knew it supernaturally, breach of faith cannot be called a precept of reason or nature.

Others, that allow for a law of nature the keeping of faith, do nevertheless make exception of certain persons; as heretics, and such as use not to perform their covenant to others; and this also is against reason. For if any fault of a man be sufficient to discharge our covenant made, the same ought in reason to have been sufficient to have hindered the making of it.

The names of just and unjust when they are attributed to men, signify one thing, and when they are attributed to actions, another. When they are attributed to men, they signify conformity, or

inconformity of manners, to reason. But when they are attributed to action they signify the conformity, or inconformity to reason, not of manners, or manner of life, but of particular actions. A just man therefore is he that taketh all the care he can that his actions may be all just; and an unjust man is he that neglecteth it. And such men are more often in our language styled by the names of righteous and unrighteous than just and unjust though the meaning be the same. Therefore a righteous man does not lose that title by one or a few unjust actions that proceed from sudden passion, or mistake of things or persons, nor does an unrighteous man lose his character for such actions as he does, or forbears to do, for fear: because his will is not framed by the justice, but by the apparent benefit of what he is to do. That which gives to human actions the relish of justice is a certain nobleness or gallantness of courage, rarely found, by which a man scorns to be beholding for the contentment of his life to fraud, or breach of promise. This justice of the manners is that which is meant where justice is called a virtue; and injustice, a vice.

But the justice of actions denominates men, not just, but guiltless: and the injustice of the same

(which is also called injury) gives them but the name of guilty.

Again, the injustice of manners is the disposition or aptitude to do injury, and is injustice before it proceed to act, and without supposing any individual person injured. But the injustice of an action (that is to say, injury) supposeth an individual person injured; namely him to whom the covenant was made: and therefore many times the injury is received by one man when the damage redoundeth to another. As when the master commandeth his servant to give money to stranger; if it be not done, the injury is done to the master, whom he had before covenanted to obey; but the damage redoundeth to the stranger, to whom he had no obligation, and therefore could not injure him. And so also in Commonwealths private men may remit to one another their debts, but not robberies or other violences, whereby they are endamaged; because the detaining of debt is an injury to themselves, but robbery and violence are injuries to the person of the Commonwealth.

Whatsoever is done to a man, conformable to his own will signified to the doer, is not injury to him. For if he that doeth it hath not passed away his

original right to do what he please by some antecedent covenant, there is no breach of covenant, and therefore no injury done him. And if he have, then his will to have it done, being signified, is a release of that covenant, and so again there is no injury done him.

Justice of actions is by writers divided into commutative and distributive: and the former they say consisteth in proportion arithmetical; the latter in proportion geometrical. Commutative, therefore, they place in the equality of value of the things contracted for; and distributive, in the distribution of equal benefit to men of equal merit. As if it were injustice to sell dearer than we buy, or to give more to a man than he merits. The value of all things contracted for is measured by the appetite of the contractors, and therefore the just value is that which they be contented to give. And merit (besides that which is by covenant, where the performance on one part meriteth the performance of the other part, and falls under justice commutative, not distributive) is not due by justice, but is rewarded of grace only. And therefore this distinction, in the sense wherein it useth to be expounded, is not right. To speak properly, commutative justice is the justice of a

contractor; that is, a performance of covenant in buying and selling, hiring and letting to hire, lending and borrowing, exchanging, bartering, and other acts of contract.

And distributive justice, the justice of an arbitrator; that is to say, the act of defining what is just. Wherein, being trusted by them that make him arbitrator, if he perform his trust, he is said to distribute to every man his own: and this is indeed just distribution, and may be called, though improperly, distributive justice, but more properly equity, which also is a law of nature, as shall be shown in due place.

As justice dependeth on antecedent covenant; so does gratitude depend on antecedent grace; that is to say, antecedent free gift; and is the fourth law of nature, which may be conceived in this form: that a man which receiveth benefit from another of mere grace endeavour that he which giveth it have no reasonable cause to repent him of his good will. For no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good; of which if men see they shall be frustrated, there will be no beginning of benevolence or trust,

nor consequently of mutual help, nor of reconciliation of one man to another; and therefore they are to remain still in the condition of war, which is contrary to the first and fundamental law of nature which commandeth men to seek peace. The breach of this law is called ingratitude, and hath the same relation to grace that injustice hath to obligation by covenant.

A fifth law of nature is complaisance; that is to say, that every man strive to accommodate himself to the rest. For the understanding whereof we may consider that there is in men's aptness to society a diversity of nature, rising from their diversity of affections, not unlike to that we see in stones brought together for building of an edifice. For as that stone which by the asperity and irregularity of figure takes more room from others than itself fills, and for hardness cannot be easily made plain, and thereby hindereth the building, is by the builders cast away as unprofitable and troublesome: so also, a man that by asperity of nature will strive to retain those things which to himself are superfluous, and to others necessary, and for the stubbornness of his passions cannot be corrected, is to be left or cast out of society as cumbersome thereunto. For seeing every man, not only by right,

but also by necessity of nature, is supposed to endeavour all he can to obtain that which is necessary for his conservation, he that shall oppose himself against it for things superfluous is guilty of the war that thereupon is to follow, and therefore doth that which is contrary to the fundamental law of nature, which commandeth to seek peace. The observers of this law may be called sociable, (the Latins call them *commodi*); the contrary, stubborn, insociable, forward, intractable.

A sixth law of nature is this: that upon caution of the future time, a man ought to pardon the offences past of them that, repenting, desire it. For pardon is nothing but granting of peace; which though granted to them that persevere in their hostility, be not peace, but fear; yet not granted to them that give caution of the future time is sign of an aversion to peace, and therefore contrary to the law of nature.

A seventh is: that in revenges (that is, retribution of evil for evil), men look not at the greatness of the evil past, but the greatness of the good to follow. Whereby we are forbidden to inflict punishment with any other design than for correction of the

offender, or direction of others. For this law is consequent to the next before it, that commandeth pardon upon security of the future time. Besides, revenge without respect to the example and profit to come is a triumph, or glorying in the hurt of another, tending to no end (for the end is always somewhat to come); and glorying to no end is vain-glory, and contrary to reason; and to hurt without reason tendeth to the introduction of war, which is against the law of nature, and is commonly styled by the name of cruelty.

And because all signs of hatred, or contempt, provoke to fight; insomuch as most men choose rather to hazard their life than not to be revenged, we may in the eighth place, for a law of nature, set down this precept: that no man by deed, word, countenance, or gesture, declare hatred or contempt of another. The breach of which law is commonly called contumely.

The question who is the better man has no place in the condition of mere nature, where (as has been shown before) all men are equal. The inequality that now is has been introduced by the laws civil. I know that Aristotle in the first book of his Politics,

for a foundation of his doctrine, maketh men by nature, some more worthy to command, meaning the wiser sort, such as he thought himself to be for his philosophy; others to serve, meaning those that had strong bodies, but were not philosophers as he; as master and servant were not introduced by consent of men, but by difference of wit: which is not only against reason, but also against experience. For there are very few so foolish that had not rather govern themselves than be governed by others: nor when the wise, in their own conceit, contend by force with them who distrust their own wisdom, do they always, or often, or almost at any time, get the victory. If nature therefore have made men equal, that equality is to be acknowledged: or if nature have made men unequal, yet because men that think themselves equal will not enter into conditions of peace, but upon equal terms, such equality must be admitted. And therefore for the ninth law of nature, I put this: that every man acknowledge another for his equal by nature. The breach of this precept is pride. On this law dependeth another: that at the entrance into conditions of peace, no man require to reserve to himself any right which he is not content should he reserved to every one

of the rest. As it is necessary for all men that seek peace to lay down certain rights of nature; that is to say, not to have liberty to do all they list, so is it necessary for man's life to retain some: as right to govern their own bodies; enjoy air, water, motion, ways to go from place to place; and all things else without which a man cannot live, or not live well. If in this case, at the making of peace, men require for themselves that which they would not have to be granted to others, they do contrary to the precedent law that commandeth the acknowledgement of natural equality, and therefore also against the law of nature. The observers of this law are those we call modest, and the breakers arrogant men. The Greeks call the violation of this law pleonexia; that is, a desire of more than their share.

Also, if a man he trusted to judge between man and man, it is a precept of the law of nature that he deal equally between them. For without that, the controversies of men cannot be determined but by war. He therefore that is partial in judgement, doth what in him lies to deter men from the use of judges and arbitrators, and consequently, against the fundamental law of nature, is the cause of war.

The observance of this law, from the equal distribution to each man of that which in reason belonged to him, is called equity, and (as I have said before) distributive justice: the violation, acceptance of persons, *prosopolepsia*.

And from this followeth another law: that such things as cannot be divided be enjoyed in common, if it can be; and if the quantity of the thing permit, without stint; otherwise proportionably to the number of them that have right. For otherwise the distribution is unequal, and contrary to equity.

But some things there be that can neither be divided nor enjoyed in common. Then, the law of nature which prescribeth equity requireth: that the entire right, or else (making the use alternate) the first possession, be determined by lot. For equal distribution is of the law of nature; and other means of equal distribution cannot be imagined. OF lots there be two sorts, arbitrary and natural. Arbitrary is that which is agreed on by the competitors; natural is either primogeniture (which the Greek calls *kleronomia*, which signifies, given by lot), or first seizure.

And therefore those things which cannot be enjoyed in common, nor divided, ought to be adjudged to the first possessor; and in some cases to the first born, as acquired by lot.

It is also a law of nature: that all men that mediate peace he allowed safe conduct. For the law that commandeth peace, as the end, commandeth intercession, as the means; and to intercession the means is safe conduct.

And because, though men be never so willing to observe these laws, there may nevertheless arise questions concerning a man's action; first, whether it were done, or not done; secondly, if done, whether against the law, or not against the law; the former whereof is called a question of fact, the latter a question of right; therefore unless the parties to the question covenant mutually to stand to the sentence of another, they are as far from peace as ever. This other, to whose sentence they submit, is called an arbitrator. And therefore it is of the law of nature that they that are at controversy submit their right to the judgement of an arbitrator.

And seeing every man is presumed to do all things

in order to his own benefit, no man is a fit arbitrator in his own cause: and if he were never so fit, yet equity allowing to each party equal benefit, if one be admitted to be judge, the other is to be admitted also; and so the controversy, that is, the cause of war, remains, against the law of nature.

For the same reason no man in any cause ought to be received for arbitrator to whom greater profit, or honour, or pleasure apparently ariseth out of the victory of one party than of the other: for he hath taken, though an unavoidable bribe, yet a bribe; and no man can be obliged to trust him. And thus also the controversy and the condition of war remaineth, contrary to the law of nature.

And in a controversy of fact, the judge being to give no more credit to one than to the other, if there be no other arguments, must give credit to a third; or to a third and fourth; or more: for else the question is undecided, and left to force, contrary to the law of nature.

These are the laws of nature, dictating peace, for a means of the conservation of men in multitudes; and which only concern the doctrine of civil society. There be other things tending to the

destruction of particular men; as drunkenness, and all other parts of intemperance, which may therefore also be reckoned amongst those things which the law of nature hath forbidden, but are not necessary to be mentioned, nor are pertinent enough to this place.

And though this may seem too subtle a deduction of the laws of nature to be taken notice of by all men, whereof the most part are too busy in getting food, and the rest too negligent to understand; yet to leave all men inexcusable, they have been contracted into one easy sum, intelligible even to the meanest capacity; and that is: Do not that to another which thou wouldest not have done to thyself, which showeth him that he has no more to do in learning the laws of nature but, when weighing the actions of other men with his own they seem too heavy, to put them into the other part of the balance, and his own into their place, that his own passions and self-love may add nothing to the weight; and then there is none of these laws of nature that will not appear unto him very reasonable.

# Discussion Questions

1. Hobbes famously characterizes the state of nature as a condition of war, where life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Do you agree with this depiction? Why or why not?
2. To what extent does the Hobbesian social contract, sovereignty, and the state of nature apply to contemporary society?
3. According to Hobbes, the essential role of the sovereign is to maintain the peace and security of the state. Do you agree that this should be the primary function of the government? What are the potential drawbacks or limitations of this approach?
4. Hobbes argues that individuals enter into a social contract to secure their own self-preservation and well-being. How might this idea intersect with Roanhorse’s story concerning authenticity and cultural appropriation?

# Thought Experiments

## **The Digital Social Contract**

### **Scenario**

Imagine a society where rapid technological advancement has led to the breakdown of traditional social structures and institutions. The digital state of nature is characterized by fragmentation, individualism, and anomie among users who frequent these online spaces. Despite having access to vast amounts of information and resources, users face new forms of uncertainty and insecurity. Social media, for instance, has created political echo-chambers and polarized communities, exacerbating tensions and conflicts among users.

## Thought Experiment

In this context, consider what might happen if these users came together to create a digital social contract. They would surrender their unimpeded access to the digital state of nature to a network sovereign, a centralized or decentralized authority designed to maintain order and security. The question then arises: Do the benefits of collective digital security outweigh the risks of social fragmentation?

## Things to Consider

- **Digital state of nature** — An

environment where users operate without overarching regulations, leading to chaos, misinformation, and violence.

- **Benefits** — Enhanced security, reduced misinformation, increased cooperation, and a creation of a more stable online space
- **Risks** — Potential for increased polarization, imposition of unwanted regulations, and loss of individual autonomy
- **Alternative scenarios** — Divergent digital social contracts might emerge, leading to a multiplicity of network sovereigns. This could result in greater polarization or innovative forms of governance.
- **Ethical dimensions** —

Questions about autonomy, freedom, and consent are paramount. How do users balance their desire for security with their need for personal freedom?

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## Further Reading

It is important to remember that Hobbes's base assumption, consigning *masterless men* to a perpetual state of war, effectively fixes human rationality and progress to a European patriarchal state. This 'civilizing discourse' has inspired a long series of binary oppositions that furnish projects of gendered violence, racial subordination, and colonial erasure. Consider the two readings below that confront this political rationality:

- “Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™” by Rebecca Roanhorse (2017)
  - “Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™” is a vivid work of short science fiction that tackles themes of colonial normativity and epistemic violence.
- “Non-Contractual Society: A Feminist View” by Virginia Held (1987)
  - “Non-Contractual Society: A Feminist View” all together rejects the structural violence inherent to the contractual paradigm, arguing instead for the integration of mothering relationships into societal discourse.

For further reading, check out “What’s in It for Me? On Egoism and Social Contract Theory” by Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao (2019).

<https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/on-egoism-and-social-contract-theory/>

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# How to Cite This Page

McCracken, Calum. 2024. "Contractarianism." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/contractarianism/>.

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# Moral and Ethical Relativism

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# Introduction



In this brief yet famous paragraph of Herodotus's, he makes what at first appears to be a very straightforward argument: morality and ethics are dictated by the customs and culture that you happened to grow up with. In other words, culture and custom is the source for our views about right and wrong. But there is much more to his argument than just this. On Herodotus's view, there appears to be an irresolvable disagreement between people about what is right and what is wrong (Herodotus 1920).

Pay attention to Herodotus's (1920) claim that if we were to ask each culture around the world who has the best customs, norms, or values, it is likely that each culture would say that theirs is the best. Herodotus demonstrates this point by considering the different ways that the Greeks and Callataie honour their dead. His purpose in using this is to show us how two different cultures with different customs each find what the other does to be terrible. Both think that how the other person honours their dead is not honouring them at all.

In fact, they think it is deeply disrespectful and abhorrent. Thus, each group with their different cultural backgrounds, has a *relative* view of morality (Herodotus 1920).

Right and wrong is *relative* to their cultural background, and thus, each thinks their practices are the best.

## Reading

[From *The Histories*, Book 3, Chapter 38, Section 1 (Herodotus 1920)]

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## Herodotus: Custom is King

I hold it then in every way proved that Cambyses was quite insane; or he would never have set himself to deride religion and custom. For if it were proposed to all nations to choose which seemed best of all customs, each, after examination, would

place its own first; so well is each convinced that its own are by far the best. It is not therefore to be supposed that anyone, except a madman, would turn such things to ridicule. I will give this one proof among many from which it may be inferred that all men hold this belief about their customs. When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them for what price they would eat their fathers' dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. Then Darius summoned those Indians who are called Callatae, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding through interpreters what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud, that he should not speak of so horrid an act. So firmly rooted are these beliefs; and it is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem that custom is lord of all.<sup>1</sup>

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# Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Herodotus's example of how the Greeks and Callatiae honour their dead is good enough to prove that 'custom is lord of all?' Why or why not?
2. Give an argument in favour of Herodotus and then an argument against Herodotus. Which do you find more persuasive, and why?
3. What do you think of the idea that both the Greeks and Callatiae have the shared practice of honouring their dead, but they have different views on the correct way to do it? Do you think that this supports Herodotus's argument or not?
4. How might Herodotus's claims of morality be influenced, supported, or countered by multiculturalism, globalization, or immigration?
5. What is an example from your own background that makes you think Herodotus is right wrong? Explain

why.

# Thought Experiments

## **The Omniscient Judge**

Suppose that you were to meet a person who had omniscient powers and knew everything about the different histories, cultures, and societal contexts throughout the world. Now, suppose you were to ask this entity to make a moral judgement about a contentious issue (e.g. capital punishment, lying, or stealing). Is it possible that this person makes an objective moral claim, or would they side with moral relativism?

## **The Moral Astronaut**

Imagine you are an explorer who discovers a distant planet inhabited by intelligent beings

with a moral code drastically different from any on Earth. On this planet, what we consider morally abhorrent (e.g., dishonesty and violence) is celebrated, and what we consider virtuous (e.g., kindness and honesty) is frowned upon. Should we judge the moral code of this planet by our own moral standards, or should we accept their practices as morally valid in their own cultural context?

### **Universal Law**

Suppose you are tasked with writing a law intended to be a universal human right that applies to everyone in the

world irrespective of their culture, history, or background. Do you think it is possible to write such a law?

### **The Unbiased Observer**

Imagine a person who has no cultural bias and no affiliations with any particular society. Now, imagine that this same person was asked to judge the norms, morality, and ethical behaviour of different cultures. What do you think this person would say about slavery, murder, and theft?

# Further Reading

- *A Defense of Ethical Relativism* by Ruth Benedict (1934)
- “Why Morality is Not Relative” (pp. 14–31 in *Elements of Moral Philosophy*) by James Rachels (2007)
- “Moral Relativism and Meta-Ethics” by Paul Rezkalla (2019)

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## How to Cite This Page

Aiken, Hunter. 2024. "Moral and Ethical Relativism." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/moral-and-ethical-relativism/>.

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# Deontological Ethics

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# Introduction

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Is morality just all about happiness and pleasure? One essential ingredient to discussions about morality is the notion that morality entails having *duties* and *obligations*. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) thought that in order to be moral, we need to follow rules or *maxims* which, when discovered by the use of reason, can guide us to rationally grounded answers about what we *ought* to do. Kant calls such maxims *categorical imperatives*, and they are distinct from *hypothetical imperatives* (Kant 2017).

**Hypothetical imperatives** are moral claims that take the shape of ‘if you want *x*, then you need to do *y*.’ For instance, ‘if you want *to maximize the happiness of the greatest number of people*, then you *are morally obligated to do the action which would do so*.’ Under hypothetical imperatives, there are a number of different outcomes in which the happiness of the greatest number could be satisfied (Kant 2017).

On the other hand, there are some moral claims that are absolute commands. They make moral claims to which there are no exceptions to the rule, and the outcome is irrelevant to the moral standing of the action. These are called **categorical imperatives**. There are two different kinds of categorical imperatives that Kant (2017) lists:

1. To 'act according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'
2. To never treat persons and others as mere means to an end, but treat them as ends in themselves.

Frankena questions the status of these maxims: "they might be necessary, but are they sufficient for determining what is actually moral and obligatory?" Frankena argues that there are some things which would satisfy the criteria of Kant's maxims, but it does not mean that it's the morally right thing to do. It also depends on the moral point of view from which we make moral laws from. Is our moral point of view to protect our own

self-interests? Or is it from the point of view of genuine concern for well-being (Frankena 1973)?

In contrast, Ursula K. LeGuin walks us through a world of morality that is an inversion of the Kantian version. In the world of Omelas, no one appears to adhere to the Kantian system of morality, and they are much more attuned to the vision of utilitarianism. Is a world where everyone is happy worth the incredible suffering of one person? LeGuin prompts us to take the second categorical imperative much more seriously as she walks us through the world of Omelas (LeGuin 1973).

## Links to the Material

- “Kant’s Theory” by William Frankena (1973) — Scroll to the bottom of the page to find the William Frankena reading for ‘Kant’s Theory’.
- “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. LeGuin (1973)

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# Discussion Questions

1. Think about your life. Do you think there are things you “ought to do” just because its the right thing to do?
2. Do you think that there are things you ought to do irrespective of your desires and inclinations?
3. What are *categorical* and *hypothetical imperatives*? Do you think that rules of etiquette are categorical or hypothetical?
4. Can you think of some examples where you might be treating someone solely as a means to an end?
5. Would capital punishment pass the 2nd categorical imperative test?
6. How might the 2nd categorical imperative relate to prostitution? Do you think that Kant would say that it is morally permissible?
7. Why might Kant’s theory be well placed to respect people’s rights?
8. Do you think we have any moral

obligations towards animals? What would Kant say?

9. What role do you think intuitions should have in assessing moral theories?

# Thought Experiments

## **Should we keep our promises?**

Suppose that you made a promise to a friend that you would help them study for your philosophy class. They are struggling with the course content and you, being the class whiz, are the only one who can help them. On your way to help them study, you see someone who desperately needs to be taken to the hospital, and you are the only one with a vehicle to do so. If you help this person, you will not be able to help your friend study. Who should you help?

## **The Lifeboat**

You are in a lifeboat with limited space, and only one

more person can be saved. There are two people in the water, one of whom is a prominent scientist who could benefit humanity significantly, and the other is a loved one. Who do you save?

### **The Drowning Person**

As you are taking a hike in the winter near a lake, suppose that you see someone drowning in a lake. The lake has barely frozen over, and you are unsure if you might fall through if you step on it. However, there is still a possibility that you can save them. Should you save them? Now, imagine you were the person in the lake and

someone else was thinking about helping you. Does this change your answer?

### **Good Intentions and Bad Outcomes**

Imagine you are working at a hardware store and are assisting a customer by retrieving something heavy from the top of the shelf. As you are moving the heavy item, it slips out from your grip and falls on the customer you were trying to help and seriously injures them. Should you be held responsible for what happened?

### **The Judge**

As a judge, you must decide a case where the evidence overwhelmingly points to the guilt of the accused, but there is a minor technicality that could acquit them. Letting the guilty person go free would uphold the letter of the law, but convicting them might better serve justice. How should you decide?

## Further Reading

- “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” by Immanuel Kant (2017)
- “Kant’s Moral Philosophy” by Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton (2022) (in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
- “How to Include the Severely Disabled in a

Contractarian Theory of Justice” by Cynthia Stark (2007) (via the TRU Library)

- “Kantian Deontology” by Joseph Kranak (2019)

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## How to Cite This Page

Aiken, Hunter. 2024. "Deontological Ethics." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press.

<https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/deontological-ethics/>.

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# Utilitarianism

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# Introduction

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“On the Principle of Utility” introduces Bentham’s theory of consequentialism, which bases the moral worth of a given action/inaction on its consequent outcome. From this theoretical bedrock, Bentham advances his principle of utility, one that fixes moral obligation to the promotion of pleasure and the mitigation of pain (Bentham 2017).

The *hedonic calculus* (or *felicific calculus*) signifies Bentham’s methodological framework that measures and compares the utility of different actions by quantifying associated pleasures and pains. As you will see below, this calculus involves several criteria — intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, and purity — to evaluate which outcomes are most likely to maximize overall happiness and minimize overall suffering (Bentham 2017).

Importantly, Bentham’s principle of utility serves as a common framework for moral assessment and decision-making that has been applied to a range

of individual, social, and governmental domains, with the overarching objective of optimizing collective being (Bentham 2017).

## Reading

[From *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy* (Bentham 2017)]

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# Jeremy Bentham — On the Principle of Utility

## Chapter I

I. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right

and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility<sup>[1]</sup> recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.

**II.** The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle<sup>[2]</sup> of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever. according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest

is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

**III.** By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

**IV.** The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what is it?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.

**V.** It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual.<sup>[3]</sup> A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

**VI.** An action then may be said to be conformable to then principle of utility, or, for shortness sake, to utility, (meaning with respect to the community at large) when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.

**VII.** A measure of government (which is but a particular kind of action, performed by a particular person or persons) may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it.

**VIII.** When an action, or in particular a measure of government, is supposed by a man to be conformable to the principle of utility, it may be convenient, for the purposes of discourse, to

imagine a kind of law or dictate, called a law or dictate of utility: and to speak of the action in question, as being conformable to such law or dictate.

**IX.** A man may be said to be a partizan of the principle of utility, when the approbation or disapprobation he annexes to any action, or to any measure, is determined by and proportioned to the tendency which he conceives it to have to augment or to diminish the happiness of the community: or in other words, to its conformity or unconformity to the laws or dictates of utility.

**X.** Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none.

**XI.** Has the rectitude of this principle been ever formally contested? It should seem that it had, by

those who have not known what they have been meaning. Is it susceptible of any direct proof? it should seem not: for that which is used to prove every thing else, cannot itself be proved: a chain of proofs must have their commencement somewhere. To give such proof is as impossible as it is needless.

**XII.** Not that there is or ever has been that human creature at breathing, however stupid or perverse, who has not on many, perhaps on most occasions of his life, deferred to it. By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it: if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions, as well as of those of other men. There have been, at the same time, not many perhaps, even of the most intelligent, who have been disposed to embrace it purely and without reserve. There are even few who have not taken some occasion or other to quarrel with it, either on account of their not understanding always how to apply it, or on account of some prejudice or other which they were afraid to examine into, or could not bear to part with. For such is the stuff that man is made of: in principle and in practice, in a right track and

in a wrong one, the rarest of all human qualities is consistency.

**XIII.** When a man attempts to combat the principle of utility, it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself.[4] His arguments, if they prove any thing, prove not that the principle is wrong, but that, according to the applications he supposes to be made of it, it is misapplied. Is it possible for a man to move the earth? Yes; but he must first find out another earth to stand upon.

**XIV.** To disprove the propriety of it by arguments is impossible; but, from the causes that have been mentioned, or from some confused or partial view of it, a man may happen to be disposed not to relish it. Where this is the case, if he thinks the settling of his opinions on such a subject worth the trouble, let him take the following steps, and at length, perhaps, he may come to reconcile himself to it.

1. Let him settle with himself, whether he would wish to discard this principle altogether; if so, let him consider what it is that all his reasonings (in matters of politics especially)

- can amount to?
2. If he would, let him settle with himself, whether he would judge and act without any principle, or whether there is any other he would judge an act by?
  3. If there be, let him examine and satisfy himself whether the principle he thinks he has found is really any separate intelligible principle; or whether it be not a mere principle in words, a kind of phrase, which at bottom expresses neither more nor less than the mere averment of his own unfounded sentiments; that is, what in another person he might be apt to call caprice?
  4. If he is inclined to think that his own approbation or disapprobation, annexed to the idea of an act, without any regard to its consequences, is a sufficient foundation for him to judge and act upon, let him ask himself whether his sentiment is to be a standard of right and wrong, with respect to every other man, or whether every man's sentiment has the same privilege of being a standard to itself?
  5. In the first case, let him ask himself whether his principle is not despotical, and hostile to

- all the rest of human race?
6. In the second case, whether it is not anarchial, and whether at this rate there are not as many different standards of right and wrong as there are men? and whether even to the same man, the same thing, which is right today, may not (without the least change in its nature) be wrong tomorrow? and whether the same thing is not right and wrong in the same place at the same time? and in either case, whether all argument is not at an end? and whether, when two men have said, "I like this," and "I don't like it," they can (upon such a principle) have any thing more to say?
  7. If he should have said to himself, No: for that the sentiment which he proposes as a standard must be grounded on reflection, let him say on what particulars the reflection is to turn? if on particulars having relation to the utility of the act, then let him say whether this is not deserting his own principle, and borrowing assistance from that very one in opposition to which he sets it up: or if not on those particulars, on what other particulars?
  8. If he should be for compounding the matter, and adopting his own principle in part, and

the principle of utility in part, let him say how far he will adopt it?

9. When he has settled with himself where he will stop, then let him ask himself how he justifies to himself the adopting it so far? and why he will not adopt it any farther?
10. Admitting any other principle than the principle of utility to be a right principle, a principle that it is right for a man to pursue; admitting (what is not true) that the word right can have a meaning without reference to utility, let him say whether there is any such thing as a motive that a man can have to pursue the dictates of it: if there is, let him say what that motive is, and how it is to be distinguished from those which enforce the dictates of utility: if not, then lastly let him say what it is this other principle can be good for?

## Footnotes

1. Greatest happiness or greatest felicity principle: this for shortness, instead of saying at length that principle which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper,

and only right and proper and universally desirable, end of human action: of human action in every situation, and in particular in that of a functionary or set of functionaries exercising the powers of Government. The word utility does not so clearly point to the ideas of pleasure and pain as the words happiness and felicity do: nor does it lead us to the consideration of the number, of the interests affected; to the number, as being the circumstance, which contributes, in the largest proportion, to the formation of the standard here in question; the standard of right and wrong, by which alone the propriety of human conduct, in every situation, can with propriety be tried. This want of a sufficiently manifest connexion between the ideas of happiness and pleasure on the one hand, and the idea of utility on the other, I have every now and then found operating, and with but too much efficiency, as a bar to the acceptance, that might otherwise have been given, to this principle.

2. The word principle is derived from the Latin principium: which seems to be compounded of the two words primus, first, or chief, and

cipium a termination which seems to be derived from capio, to take, as in mancipium, municipium; to which are analogous, auceps, forceps, and others. It is a term of very vague and very extensive signification: it is applied to any thing which is conceived to serve as a foundation or beginning to any series of operations: in some cases, of physical operations; but of mental operations in the present case. The principle here in question may be taken for an act of the mind; a sentiment; a sentiment of approbation; a sentiment which, when applied to an action, approves of its utility, as that quality of it by which the measure of approbation or disapprobation bestowed upon it ought to be governed.

3. Interest is one of those words, which not having any superior genus, cannot in the ordinary way be defined.

‘The principle of utility, (I have heard it said) is a dangerous principle: it is dangerous on certain occasions to consult it.’ This is as much as to say, what? that it is not consonant to utility, to consult utility: in short, that it is not consulting it, to consult

it. Addition by the Author, July 1822. Not long after the publication of the Fragment on Government, anno 1776, in which, in the character of all-comprehensive and all-commanding principle, the principle of utility was brought to view, one person by whom observation to the above effect was made was Alexander Wedderburn, at that time Attorney or Solicitor General, afterwards successively Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, and Chancellor of England, under the successive titles of Lord Loughborough and Earl of Rosslyn. It was made—not indeed in my hearing, but in the hearing of a person by whom it was almost immediately communicated to me. So far from being self-contradictory, it was a shrewd and perfectly true one. By that distinguished functionary, the state of the Government was thoroughly understood: by the obscure individual, at that time not so much as supposed to be so: his disquisitions had not been as yet applied, with any thing like a comprehensive view, to the field of Constitutional Law, nor therefore to those features of the English Government, by which the greatest happiness of the ruling one with or without that of a favoured few, are now so plainly seen to be the only ends to which the course of it has at any

time been directed. The principle of utility was an appellative, at that time employed by me, as it had been by others, to designate that which, in a more perspicuous and instructive manner, may, as above, be designated by the name of the greatest happiness principle. 'This principle (said Wedderburn) is a dangerous one.' Saying so, he said that which, to a certain extent, is strictly true: a principle, which lays down, as the only right and justifiable end of Government, the greatest happiness of the greatest number—how can it be denied to be a dangerous one? dangerous it unquestionably is, to every government which has for its actual end or object, the greatest happiness of a certain one, with or without the addition of some comparatively small number of others, whom it is matter of pleasure or accommodation to him to admit, each of them, to a share in the concern, on the footing of so many junior partners. Dangerous it therefore really was, to the interest—the sinister interest—of all those functionaries, himself included, whose interest it was, to maximize delay, vexation, and expense, in judicial and other modes of procedure, for the sake of the profit, extractible out of the expense. In a Government which had for its end in view

the greatest happiness of the greatest number, Alexander Wedderburn might have been Attorney General and then Chancellor: but he would not have been Attorney General with £15,000 a year, nor Chancellor, with a peerage with a veto upon all justice, with £25,000 a year, and with 500 sinecures at his disposal, under the name of Ecclesiastical Benefices, besides et cæteras.

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## Chapter IV

**I.** Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the ends that the legislator has in view; it behoves him therefore to understand their value. Pleasures and pains are the instruments he has to work with: it behoves him therefore to understand their force, which is again, in other words, their value.

**II.** To a person considered by himself, the value of a pleasure or pain considered by itself, will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances:

1. Its intensity.
2. Its duration.
3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.

**III.** These are the circumstances which are to be considered in estimating a pleasure or a pain considered each of them by itself. But when the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any act by which it is produced, there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account; these are,

1. Its fecundity, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.
2. Its purity, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain.

These two last, however, are in strictness scarcely to be deemed properties of the pleasure or the pain itself; they are not, therefore, in strictness to

be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or that pain. They are in strictness to be deemed properties only of the act, or other event, by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; and accordingly are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of such act or such event.

**IV.** To a number of persons, with reference to each of whom to the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances: to wit, the six preceding ones; viz.,

1. Its intensity.
2. Its duration.
3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.
5. Its fecundity.
6. Its purity.

And one other; to wit:

1. Its extent; that is, the number of persons to whom it extends; or (in other words) who are affected by it.

**V.** To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, proceed as follows. Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,

1. Of the value of each distinguishable pleasure which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.
2. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.
3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain.
4. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pain, and the impurity of the first pleasure.
5. Sum up all the values of all the pleasures on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that individual person; if on the

side of pain, the bad tendency of it upon the whole.

6. Take an account of the number of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. Sum up the numbers expressive of the degrees of good tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is bad upon the whole. Take the balance which if on the side of pleasure, will give the general good tendency of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general evil tendency, with respect to the same community.

**VI.** It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on

these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.

**VII.** The same process is alike applicable to pleasure and pain, in whatever shape they appear: and by whatever denomination they are distinguished: to pleasure, whether it be called good (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or profit (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of, distant pleasure,) or convenience, or advantage, benefit, emolument, happiness, and so forth: to pain, whether it be called evil, (which corresponds to good) or mischief, or inconvenience or disadvantage, or loss, or unhappiness, and so forth.

**VIII.** Nor is this a novel and unwarranted, any more than it is a useless theory. In all this there is nothing but what the practice of mankind, wheresoever they have a clear view of their own interest, is perfectly conformable to. An article of property, an estate in land, for instance, is valuable, on what account? On account of the pleasures of all kinds which it enables a man to produce, and what comes to the same thing the pains of all kinds which it enables him to avert. But the value of such an article of property is

universally understood to rise or fall according to the length or shortness of the time which a man has in it: the certainty or uncertainty of its coming into possession: and the nearness or remoteness of the time at which, if at all, it is to come into possession. As to the intensity of the pleasures which a man may derive from it, this is never thought of, because it depends upon the use which each particular person may come to make of it; which cannot be estimated till the particular pleasures he may come to derive from it, or the particular pains he may come to exclude by means of it, are brought to view. For the same reason, neither does he think of the fecundity or purity of those pleasures. Thus much for pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness, in general. We come now to consider the several particular kinds of pain and pleasure.

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# Discussion Questions

1. What is the *greatest happiness principle*, and on what basis does it determine the rightness of our actions? Do you believe it to be a reliable metric for our moral obligations? Why or why not?
2. Are considerations of justice sufficiently integrated into utilitarian theory? Why or why not?
3. How practical is Bentham's *hedonic calculus* in the real world? For example, what are the implications for public policy?

# Thought Experiment

Put this philosophy to the test by checking out the Absurd Trolley Problems web game by Neal Agarwal.

## Further Reading

- “Maximizing Morality: The Utilitarian Ethic” by Frank Araagbonfoh Abumere (2019)

<https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/maximizing-morality-the-utilitarian-ethic/>

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Bentham, Jeremy. 2017. “Jeremy Bentham – On

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## How to Cite This Page

McCracken, Calum. 2024. "Utilitarianism." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/utilitarianism/>.

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# Virtue Ethics

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## Introduction

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In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle treats well-being and happiness — or *eudaimonia* — as an activity as opposed to a static state of mind. In this way, Aristotelian ethics is an agent-centered theory that focuses on one's emergent character traits or *virtues*. Importantly, *virtue* is not a feeling but rather a settled *disposition* that arises in response to said feeling; a disposition that is rational and appropriate. *Virtues*, then, function as a set of dispositions that encourage actions in accordance with one's reasoned judgment (Aristotle 2017).

Aristotle balances the correct responses to a feeling upon the *golden mean*; to exemplify this virtuous equilibrium is to live well — or to be *eudaemon*. Aristotle uses the *function argument* to determine what good(s) this human flourishing consist of. Simply, this line of reasoning follows that because humans are uniquely disposed with rational thought, the “good” of humankind must reside in the development of this singular function. That is to say, when we reason well, we ultimately live well as human beings. Therefore, for Aristotle, well-being consists of activities that channel our singular rationality into virtue and excellence (Aristotle 2017).

## Reading

[From *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy* (Aristotle 2017)]

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# Aristotle – On Virtue

## Nicomachean Ethics

### Book One

#### Part 1

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity- as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under

strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others- in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

## Part 2

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that

ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry aims, since it is political science, in one sense of that term.

### Part 3

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political

science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premisses to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general. Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science; for

he is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life, but its discussions start from these and are about these; and, further, since he tends to follow his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable, because the end aimed at is not knowledge but action. And it makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; the defect does not depend on time, but on his living, and pursuing each successive object, as passion directs. For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit; but to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit. These remarks about the student, the sort of treatment to be expected, and the purpose of the inquiry, may be taken as our preface.

#### Part 4

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally

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there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour; they differ, however, from one another- and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great ideal that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is self-subsistent and causes the goodness of all these as well. To examine all the opinions that have been held were perhaps somewhat fruitless; enough to examine those that are most prevalent or that seem to be arguable. Let us not fail to notice, however, that there is a difference between arguments from and those to the first principles. For Plato, too, was right in raising this question and asking, as he used to do, 'are we on the way from or to the first principles?' There is a difference, as there is in a race-course between the course

from the judges to the turning-point and the way back. For, while we must begin with what is known, things are objects of knowledge in two senses—some to us, some without qualification. Presumably, then, we must begin with things known to us. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just, and generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is the starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not at the start need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting points. And as for him who neither has nor can get them, let him hear the words of Hesiod: Far best is he who knows all things himself; Good, he that hearkens when men counsel right; But he who neither knows, nor lays to heart Another's wisdom, is a useless wight.

## Part 5

Let us, however, resume our discussion from the point at which we digressed. To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure;

which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life- that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts, but they get some ground for their view from the fact that many of those in high places share the tastes of Sardanapallus. A consideration of the prominent types of life shows that people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honour; for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honour rather than on him who receives it, but the good we divine to be something proper to a man and not easily taken from him. Further, men seem to pursue honour in order that they may be assured of their goodness; at least it is by men of practical wisdom that they seek to be honoured, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue; clearly, then, according to them, at any rate, virtue is better. And perhaps one might even suppose this to be, rather than honour, the end of the political life. But even this

appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a man who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. But enough of this; for the subject has been sufficiently treated even in the current discussions. Third comes the contemplative life, which we shall consider later. The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else. And so one might rather take the aforementioned objects to be ends; for they are loved for themselves. But it is evident that not even these are ends; yet many arguments have been thrown away in support of them. Let us leave this subject, then.

## Part 6

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own. Yet it would perhaps be


thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends. The men who introduced this doctrine did not posit Ideas of classes within which they recognized priority and posteriority (which is the reason why they did not maintain the existence of an Idea embracing all numbers); but the term 'good' is used both in the category of substance and in that of quality and in that of relation, and that which is per se, i.e. substance, is prior in nature to the relative (for the latter is like an offshoot and accident of being); so that there could not be a common Idea set over all these goods. Further, since 'good' has as many senses as 'being' (for it is predicated both in the category of substance, as of God and of reason, and in quality, i.e. of the virtues, and in quantity, i.e. of that which is moderate, and in relation, i.e. of the useful, and in time, i.e. of the right opportunity, and in place, i.e. of the right locality and the like), clearly it cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it could not have been predicated in all the categories but in one only.

Further, since of the things answering to one Idea there is one science, there would have been one science of all the goods; but as it is there are many sciences even of the things that fall under one category, e.g. of opportunity, for opportunity in war is studied by strategics and in disease by medicine, and the moderate in food is studied by medicine and in exercise by the science of gymnastics. And one might ask the question, what in the world they mean by 'a thing itself', is (as is the case) in 'man himself' and in a particular man the account of man is one and the same. For in so far as they are man, they will in no respect differ; and if this is so, neither will 'good itself' and particular goods, in so far as they are good. But again it will not be good any the more for being eternal, since that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day. The Pythagoreans seem to give a more plausible account of the good, when they place the one in the column of goods; and it is they that Speusippus seems to have followed. But let us discuss these matters elsewhere; an objection to what we have said, however, may be discerned in the fact that the Platonists have not been speaking about all goods, and that the goods that are pursued and loved for themselves are called good

by reference to a single Form, while those which tend to produce or to preserve these somehow or to prevent their contraries are called so by reference to these, and in a secondary sense. Clearly, then, goods must be spoken of in two ways, and some must be good in themselves, the others by reason of these. Let us separate, then, things good in themselves from things useful, and consider whether the former are called good by reference to a single Idea. What sort of goods would one call good in themselves? Is it those that are pursued even when isolated from others, such as intelligence, sight, and certain pleasures and honours? Certainly, if we pursue these also for the sake of something else, yet one would place them among things good in themselves. Or is nothing other than the Idea of good good in itself? In that case the Form will be empty. But if the things we have named are also things good in themselves, the account of the good will have to appear as something identical in them all, as that of whiteness is identical in snow and in white lead. But of honour, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse. The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea. But what

then do we mean by the good? It is surely not like the things that only chance to have the same name. Are goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy? Certainly as sight is in the body, so is reason in the soul, and so on in other cases. But perhaps these subjects had better be dismissed for the present; for perfect precision about them would be more appropriate to another branch of philosophy. And similarly with regard to the Idea; even if there is some one good which is universally predicable of goods or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man; but we are now seeking something attainable. Perhaps, however, some one might think it worth while to recognize this with a view to the goods that are attainable and achievable; for having this as a sort of pattern we shall know better the goods that are good for us, and if we know them shall attain them. This argument has some plausibility, but seems to clash with the procedure of the sciences; for all of these, though they aim at some good and seek to supply the deficiency of it, leave on one side the knowledge of the good. Yet that all the exponents of the arts should be ignorant of, and should not

even seek, so great an aid is not probable. It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself', or how the man who has viewed the Idea itself will be a better doctor or general thereby. For a doctor seems not even to study health in this way, but the health of man, or perhaps rather the health of a particular man; it is individuals that he is healing. But enough of these topics.



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## Part 7

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable

by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking.

Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never

for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. But some limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirement to ancestors and descendants and friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. Let us examine this question, however, on another occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others- if it were so counted

it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every

animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say 'so-and-so-and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are

more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add 'in a complete life.' For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.

Let this serve as an outline of the good; for we must presumably first sketch it roughly, and then later fill in the details. But it would seem that any one is capable of carrying on and articulating what has once been well outlined, and that time is a good discoverer or partner in such a work; to which facts the advances of the arts are due; for any one can add what is lacking. And we must also remember what has been said before, and not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry. For a carpenter and a geometer investigate the right angle in different ways; the former does so in so far as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is; for he is a spectator of the truth. We must act in the same way, then, in all other matters as well, that our main task

may not be subordinated to minor questions. Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the fact be well established, as in the case of the first principles; the fact is the primary thing or first principle. Now of first principles we see some by induction, some by perception, some by a certain habituation, and others too in other ways. But each set of principles we must try to investigate in the natural way, and we must take pains to state them definitely, since they have a great influence on what follows. For the beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole, and many of the questions we ask are cleared up by it.

## Part 8

We must consider it, however, in the light not only of our conclusion and our premisses, but also of what is commonly said about it; for with a true view all the data harmonize, but with a false one the facts soon clash. Now goods have been divided into three classes, and some are described as external, others as relating to soul or to body; we call those that relate to soul most properly and truly goods, and psychical actions and activities we class as relating to soul. Therefore our account

must be sound, at least according to this view, which is an old one and agreed on by philosophers. It is correct also in that we identify the end with certain actions and activities; for thus it falls among goods of the soul and not among external goods. Another belief which harmonizes with our account is that the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action. The characteristics that are looked for in happiness seem also, all of them, to belong to what we have defined happiness as being. For some identify happiness with virtue, some with practical wisdom, others with a kind of philosophic wisdom, others with these, or one of these, accompanied by pleasure or not without pleasure; while others include also external prosperity. Now some of these views have been held by many men and men of old, others by a few eminent persons; and it is not probable that either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some one respect or even in most respects.

With those who identify happiness with virtue or some one virtue our account is in harmony; for to virtue belongs virtuous activity. But it makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the

chief good in possession or in use, in state of mind or in activity. For the state of mind may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well. And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life.

Their life is also in itself pleasant. For pleasure is a state of soul, and to each man that which he is said to be a lover of is pleasant; e.g. not only is a horse pleasant to the lover of horses, and a spectacle to the lover of sights, but also in the same way just acts are pleasant to the lover of justice and in general virtuous acts to the lover of virtue. Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure

in itself. For, besides what we have said, the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly, nor any man liberal who did not enjoy liberal actions; and similarly in all other cases. If this is so, virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also good and noble, and have each of these attributes in the highest degree, since the good man judges well about these attributes; his judgement is such as we have described. Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world, and these attributes are not severed as in the inscription at Delos-

Most noble is that which is justest, and best is health; But pleasantest is it to win what we love.

For all these properties belong to the best activities; and these, or one- the best- of these, we identify with happiness.

Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some

things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with virtue.

### Part 9

For this reason also the question is asked, whether happiness is to be acquired by learning or by habituation or some other sort of training, or comes in virtue of some divine providence or again by chance. Now if there is any gift of the gods to men, it is reasonable that happiness should be god-given, and most surely god-given of all human things inasmuch as it is the best. But this question would perhaps be more appropriate to another inquiry; happiness seems, however, even if it is not god-sent but comes as a result of virtue and some process of learning or training, to be among the most godlike things; for that which is the prize and

end of virtue seems to be the best thing in the world, and something godlike and blessed.

It will also on this view be very generally shared; for all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue may win it by a certain kind of study and care. But if it is better to be happy thus than by chance, it is reasonable that the facts should be so, since everything that depends on the action of nature is by nature as good as it can be, and similarly everything that depends on art or any rational cause, and especially if it depends on the best of all causes. To entrust to chance what is greatest and most noble would be a very defective arrangement.

The answer to the question we are asking is plain also from the definition of happiness; for it has been said to be a virtuous activity of soul, of a certain kind. Of the remaining goods, some must necessarily pre-exist as conditions of happiness, and others are naturally co-operative and useful as instruments. And this will be found to agree with what we said at the outset; for we stated the end of political science to be the best end, and political science spends most of its pains on making the

citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts.

It is natural, then, that we call neither ox nor horse nor any other of the animals happy; for none of them is capable of sharing in such activity. For this reason also a boy is not happy; for he is not yet capable of such acts, owing to his age; and boys who are called happy are being congratulated by reason of the hopes we have for them. For there is required, as we said, not only complete virtue but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy.

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#### Part 10

Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we, as Solon says, see the end? Even if we are to lay down this doctrine, is it also the case that a man is happy when he is dead? Or is not this quite absurd,

especially for us who say that happiness is an activity? But if we do not call the dead man happy, and if Solon does not mean this, but that one can then safely call a man blessed as being at last beyond evils and misfortunes, this also affords matter for discussion; for both evil and good are thought to exist for a dead man, as much as for one who is alive but not aware of them; e.g. honours and dishonours and the good or bad fortunes of children and in general of descendants. And this also presents a problem; for though a man has lived happily up to old age and has had a death worthy of his life, many reverses may befall his descendants- some of them may be good and attain the life they deserve, while with others the opposite may be the case; and clearly too the degrees of relationship between them and their ancestors may vary indefinitely. It would be odd, then, if the dead man were to share in these changes and become at one time happy, at another wretched; while it would also be odd if the fortunes of the descendants did not for some time have some effect on the happiness of their ancestors.

But we must return to our first difficulty; for perhaps by a consideration of it our present

problem might be solved. Now if we must see the end and only then call a man happy, not as being happy but as having been so before, surely this is a paradox, that when he is happy the attribute that belongs to him is not to be truly predicated of him because we do not wish to call living men happy, on account of the changes that may befall them, and because we have assumed happiness to be something permanent and by no means easily changed, while a single man may suffer many turns of fortune's wheel. For clearly if we were to keep pace with his fortunes, we should often call the same man happy and again wretched, making the happy man out to be chameleon and insecurely based. Or is this keeping pace with his fortunes quite wrong? Success or failure in life does not depend on these, but human life, as we said, needs these as mere additions, while virtuous activities or their opposites are what constitute happiness or the reverse.

The question we have now discussed confirms our definition. For no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities (these are thought to be more durable even than knowledge of the sciences), and of these themselves the most valuable are more durable because those who are

happy spend their life most readily and most continuously in these; for this seems to be the reason why we do not forget them. The attribute in question, then, will belong to the happy man, and he will be happy throughout his life; for always, or by preference to everything else, he will be engaged in virtuous action and contemplation, and he will bear the chances of life most nobly and altogether decorously, if he is 'truly good' and 'foursquare beyond reproach'.

Now many events happen by chance, and events differing in importance; small pieces of good fortune or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life happier (for not only are they themselves such as to add beauty to life, but the way a man deals with them may be noble and good), while if they turn out ill they crush and maim happiness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.

If activities are, as we said, what gives life its

character, no happy man can become miserable; for he will never do the acts that are hateful and mean. For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command and a good shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the hides that are given him; and so with all other craftsmen. And if this is the case, the happy man can never become miserable; though he will not reach blessedness, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam.

Nor, again, is he many-coloured and changeable; for neither will he be moved from his happy state easily or by any ordinary misadventures, but only by many great ones, nor, if he has had many great misadventures, will he recover his happiness in a short time, but if at all, only in a long and complete one in which he has attained many splendid successes.

When then should we not say that he is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life? Or must we add 'and who is destined to live

thus and die as befits his life'? Certainly the future is obscure to us, while happiness, we claim, is an end and something in every way final. If so, we shall call happy those among living men in whom these conditions are, and are to be, fulfilled- but happy men. So much for these questions.

## Part 11

That the fortunes of descendants and of all a man's friends should not affect his happiness at all seems a very unfriendly doctrine, and one opposed to the opinions men hold; but since the events that happen are numerous and admit of all sorts of difference, and some come more near to us and others less so, it seems a long- nay, an infinite- task to discuss each in detail; a general outline will perhaps suffice. If, then, as some of a man's own misadventures have a certain weight and influence on life while others are, as it were, lighter, so too there are differences among the misadventures of our friends taken as a whole, and it makes a difference whether the various suffering befall the living or the dead (much more even than whether lawless and terrible deeds are presupposed in a tragedy or done on the stage), this difference also must be taken into account; or rather, perhaps,

the fact that doubt is felt whether the dead share in any good or evil. For it seems, from these considerations, that even if anything whether good or evil penetrates to them, it must be something weak and negligible, either in itself or for them, or if not, at least it must be such in degree and kind as not to make happy those who are not happy nor to take away their blessedness from those who are. The good or bad fortunes of friends, then, seem to have some effects on the dead, but effects of such a kind and degree as neither to make the happy unhappy nor to produce any other change of the kind.

## Part 12

These questions having been definitely answered, let us consider whether happiness is among the things that are praised or rather among the things that are prized; for clearly it is not to be placed among potentialities. Everything that is praised seems to be praised because it is of a certain kind and is related somehow to something else; for we praise the just or brave man and in general both the good man and virtue itself because of the actions and functions involved, and we praise the strong man, the good runner, and so on, because

he is of a certain kind and is related in a certain way to something good and important. This is clear also from the praises of the gods; for it seems absurd that the gods should be referred to our standard, but this is done because praise involves a reference, to something else. But if if praise is for things such as we have described, clearly what applies to the best things is not praise, but something greater and better, as is indeed obvious; for what we do to the gods and the most godlike of men is to call them blessed and happy. And so too with good things; no one praises happiness as he does justice, but rather calls it blessed, as being something more divine and better.

Eudoxus also seems to have been right in his method of advocating the supremacy of pleasure; he thought that the fact that, though a good, it is not praised indicated it to be better than the things that are praised, and that this is what God and the good are; for by reference to these all other things are judged. Praise is appropriate to virtue, for as a result of virtue men tend to do noble deeds, but encomia are bestowed on acts, whether of the body or of the soul. But perhaps nicety in these matters is more proper to those who have made

a study of enomia; to us it is clear from what has been said that happiness is among the things that are prized and perfect. It seems to be so also from the fact that it is a first principle; for it is for the sake of this that we all do all that we do, and the first principle and cause of goods is, we claim, something prized and divine.

### Part 13

Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue, we must consider the nature of virtue; for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of happiness. The true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things; for he wishes to make his fellow citizens good and obedient to the laws. As an example of this we have the lawgivers of the Cretans and the Spartans, and any others of the kind that there may have been. And if this inquiry belongs to political science, clearly the pursuit of it will be in accordance with our original plan. But clearly the virtue we must study is human virtue; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness. By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of soul. But if

this is so, clearly the student of politics must know somehow the facts about soul, as the man who is to heal the eyes or the body as a whole must know about the eyes or the body; and all the more since politics is more prized and better than medicine; but even among doctors the best educated spend much labour on acquiring knowledge of the body. The student of politics, then, must study the soul, and must study it with these objects in view, and do so just to the extent which is sufficient for the questions we are discussing; for further precision is perhaps something more laborious than our purposes require.

Some things are said about it, adequately enough, even in the discussions outside our school, and we must use these; e.g. that one element in the soul is irrational and one has a rational principle. Whether these are separated as the parts of the body or of anything divisible are, or are distinct by definition but by nature inseparable, like convex and concave in the circumference of a circle, does not affect the present question.

Of the irrational element one division seems to be widely distributed, and vegetative in its nature, I mean that which causes nutrition and growth; for

it is this kind of power of the soul that one must assign to all nurslings and to embryos, and this same power to fullgrown creatures; this is more reasonable than to assign some different power to them. Now the excellence of this seems to be common to all species and not specifically human; for this part or faculty seems to function most in sleep, while goodness and badness are least manifest in sleep (whence comes the saying that the happy are not better off than the wretched for half their lives; and this happens naturally enough, since sleep is an inactivity of the soul in that respect in which it is called good or bad), unless perhaps to a small extent some of the movements actually penetrate to the soul, and in this respect the dreams of good men are better than those of ordinary people. Enough of this subject, however; let us leave the nutritive faculty alone, since it has by its nature no share in human excellence.

There seems to be also another irrational element in the soul—one which in a sense, however, shares in a rational principle. For we praise the rational principle of the continent man and of the incontinent, and the part of their soul that has such a principle, since it urges them aright and towards the best objects; but there is found in them also

another element naturally opposed to the rational principle, which fights against and resists that principle. For exactly as paralysed limbs when we intend to move them to the right turn on the contrary to the left, so is it with the soul; the impulses of incontinent people move in contrary directions. But while in the body we see that which moves astray, in the soul we do not. No doubt, however, we must none the less suppose that in the soul too there is something contrary to the rational principle, resisting and opposing it. In what sense it is distinct from the other elements does not concern us. Now even this seems to have a share in a rational principle, as we said; at any rate in the continent man it obeys the rational principle and presumably in the temperate and brave man it is still more obedient; for in him it speaks, on all matters, with the same voice as the rational principle.

Therefore the irrational element also appears to be two-fold. For the vegetative element in no way shares in a rational principle, but the appetitive and in general the desiring element in a sense shares in it, in so far as it listens to and obeys it; this is the sense in which we speak of 'taking account' of one's father or one's friends, not that in

which we speak of 'accounting for a mathematical property. That the irrational element is in some sense persuaded by a rational principle is indicated also by the giving of advice and by all reproof and exhortation. And if this element also must be said to have a rational principle, that which has a rational principle (as well as that which has not) will be twofold, one subdivision having it in the strict sense and in itself, and the other having a tendency to obey as one does one's father.

Virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference; for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues.

## Book Two

### Part 1

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ethike) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

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Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one.

Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyreplayers are produced. And the corresponding

statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

## Part 2

Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at

theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we have said. Now, that we must act according to the right rule is a common principle and must be assumed—it will be discussed later, i.e. both what the right rule is, and how it is related to the other virtues. But this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation.

But though our present account is of this nature

we must give what help we can. First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.

But not only are the sources and causes of their origination and growth the same as those of their destruction, but also the sphere of their

actualization will be the same; for this is also true of the things which are more evident to sense, e.g. of strength; it is produced by taking much food and undergoing much exertion, and it is the strong man that will be most able to do these things. So too is it with the virtues; by abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and it is when we have become so that we are most able to abstain from them; and similarly too in the case of courage; for by being habituated to despise things that are terrible and to stand our ground against them we become brave, and it is when we have become so that we shall be most able to stand our ground against them.

### Part 3

We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that ensues on acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward. For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad

things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education.

Again, if the virtues are concerned with actions and passions, and every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain, for this reason also virtue will be concerned with pleasures and pains. This is indicated also by the fact that punishment is inflicted by these means; for it is a kind of cure, and it is the nature of cures to be effected by contraries.

Again, as we said but lately, every state of soul has a nature relative to and concerned with the kind of things by which it tends to be made worse or better; but it is by reason of pleasures and pains that men become bad, by pursuing and avoiding these- either the pleasures and pains they ought not or when they ought not or as they ought not, or by going wrong in one of the other similar ways that may be distinguished. Hence men even define the virtues as certain states of impassivity and rest; not well, however, because they speak absolutely,

and do not say 'as one ought' and 'as one ought not' and 'when one ought or ought not', and the other things that may be added. We assume, then, that this kind of excellence tends to do what is best with regard to pleasures and pains, and vice does the contrary.

The following facts also may show us that virtue and vice are concerned with these same things. There being three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, the pleasant, and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful, about all of these the good man tends to go right and the bad man to go wrong, and especially about pleasure; for this is common to the animals, and also it accompanies all objects of choice; for even the noble and the advantageous appear pleasant.

Again, it has grown up with us all from our infancy; this is why it is difficult to rub off this passion, engrained as it is in our life. And we measure even our actions, some of us more and others less, by the rule of pleasure and pain. For this reason, then, our whole inquiry must be about these; for to feel delight and pain rightly or wrongly has no small effect on our actions.

Again, it is harder to fight with pleasure than with anger, to use Heraclitus' phrase, but both art and virtue are always concerned with what is harder; for even the good is better when it is harder. Therefore for this reason also the whole concern both of virtue and of political science is with pleasures and pains; for the man who uses these well will be good, he who uses them badly bad.

That virtue, then, is concerned with pleasures and pains, and that by the acts from which it arises it is both increased and, if they are done differently, destroyed, and that the acts from which it arose are those in which it actualizes itself- let this be taken as said.

#### Part 4

The question might be asked,; what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in



accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians.

Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something that is in accordance with the laws of grammar, either by chance or at the suggestion of another. A man will be a grammarian, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself.

Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession

of the virtues knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts.

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them as just and temperate men do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.

But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy.

## Part 5

Next we must consider what virtue is. Since things

that are found in the soul are of three kinds—passions, faculties, states of character, virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g. of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions.

Now neither the virtues nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised nor blamed for our passions (for the man who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we are praised or blamed.

Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way.

For these reasons also they are not faculties; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity of feeling the passions; again, we have the faculties by nature, but we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoken of this before. If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character.

Thus we have stated what virtue is in respect of its genus.

## Part 6

We must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good;

for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well.

How this is to happen we have stated already, but it will be made plain also by the following consideration of the specific nature of virtue. In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little- and this is not one, nor the same for all. For instance, if ten is many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount; this is intermediate according to arithmetical proportion. But the intermediate relatively to us is not to be taken so;

if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little- too little for Milo, too much for the beginner in athletic exercises. The same is true of running and wrestling. Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this- the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us.

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well- by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too

much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate.

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult- to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue;

For men are good in but one way, but bad in many.

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme.

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them

is to go wrong. It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.

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### Part 7

We must, however, not only make this general statement, but also apply it to the individual facts.

For among statements about conduct those which are general apply more widely, but those which are particular are more genuine, since conduct has to do with individual cases, and our statements must harmonize with the facts in these cases. We may take these cases from our table. With regard to feelings of fear and

confidence courage is the mean; of the people who exceed, he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name (many of the states have no name), while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward. With regard to pleasures and pains- not all of them, and not so much with regard to the pains- the mean is temperance, the excess self-indulgence. Persons deficient with regard to the pleasures are not often found; hence such persons also have received no name. But let us call them 'insensible'.

With regard to giving and taking of money the mean is liberality, the excess and the defect prodigality and meanness. In these actions people exceed and fall short in contrary ways; the prodigal exceeds in spending and falls short in taking, while the mean man exceeds in taking and falls short in spending. (At present we are giving a mere outline or summary, and are satisfied with this; later these states will be more exactly determined.) With regard to money there are also other dispositions- a mean, magnificence (for the magnificent man differs from the liberal man; the former deals with large sums, the latter with small ones), an excess, tastelessness and vulgarity, and a deficiency,

niggardliness; these differ from the states opposed to liberality, and the mode of their difference will be stated later. With regard to honour and dishonour the mean is proper pride, the excess is known as a sort of 'empty vanity', and the deficiency is undue humility; and as we said liberality was related to magnificence, differing from it by dealing with small sums, so there is a state similarly related to proper pride, being concerned with small honours while that is concerned with great. For it is possible to desire honour as one ought, and more than one ought, and less, and the man who exceeds in his desires is called ambitious, the man who falls short unambitious, while the intermediate person has no name. The dispositions also are nameless, except that that of the ambitious man is called ambition. Hence the people who are at the extremes lay claim to the middle place; and we ourselves sometimes call the intermediate person ambitious and sometimes unambitious, and sometimes praise the ambitious man and sometimes the unambitious. The reason of our doing this will be stated in what follows; but now let us speak of the remaining states according to the method which has been indicated.

With regard to anger also there is an excess, a deficiency, and a mean. Although they can scarcely be said to have names, yet since we call the intermediate person good-tempered let us call the mean good temper; of the persons at the extremes let the one who exceeds be called irascible, and his vice irascibility, and the man who falls short an inirascible sort of person, and the deficiency inirascibility.

There are also three other means, which have a certain likeness to one another, but differ from one another: for they are all concerned with intercourse in words and actions, but differ in that one is concerned with truth in this sphere, the other two with pleasantness; and of this one kind is exhibited in giving amusement, the other in all the circumstances of life. We must therefore speak of these too, that we may the better see that in all things the mean is praise-worthy, and the extremes neither praiseworthy nor right, but worthy of blame. Now most of these states also have no names, but we must try, as in the other cases, to invent names ourselves so that we may be clear and easy to follow. With regard to truth, then, the intermediate is a truthful sort of person and the mean may be called truthfulness, while the

pretence which exaggerates is boastfulness and the person characterized by it a boaster, and that which understates is mock modesty and the person characterized by it mock-modest. With regard to pleasantness in the giving of amusement the intermediate person is ready-witted and the disposition ready wit, the excess is buffoonery and the person characterized by it a buffoon, while the man who falls short is a sort of boor and his state is boorishness. With regard to the remaining kind of pleasantness, that which is exhibited in life in general, the man who is pleasant in the right way is friendly and the mean is friendliness, while the man who exceeds is an obsequious person if he has no end in view, a flatterer if he is aiming at his own advantage, and the man who falls short and is unpleasant in all circumstances is a quarrelsome and surly sort of person.

There are also means in the passions and concerned with the passions; since shame is not a virtue, and yet praise is extended to the modest man. For even in these matters one man is said to be intermediate, and another to exceed, as for instance the bashful man who is ashamed of everything; while he who falls short or is not ashamed of anything at all is shameless, and the

intermediate person is modest. Righteous indignation is a mean between envy and spite, and these states are concerned with the pain and pleasure that are felt at the fortunes of our neighbours; the man who is characterized by righteous indignation is pained at undeserved good fortune, the envious man, going beyond him, is pained at all good fortune, and the spiteful man falls so far short of being pained that he even rejoices. But these states there will be an opportunity of describing elsewhere; with regard to justice, since it has not one simple meaning, we shall, after describing the other states, distinguish its two kinds and say how each of them is a mean; and similarly we shall treat also of the rational virtues.

## Part 8

There are three kinds of disposition, then, two of them vices, involving excess and deficiency respectively, and one a virtue, viz. the mean, and all are in a sense opposed to all; for the extreme states are contrary both to the intermediate state and to each other, and the intermediate to the extremes; as the equal is greater relatively to the less, less relatively to the greater, so the middle

states are excessive relatively to the deficiencies, deficient relatively to the excesses, both in passions and in actions. For the brave man appears rash relatively to the coward, and cowardly relatively to the rash man; and similarly the temperate man appears self-indulgent relatively to the insensible man, insensible relatively to the self-indulgent, and the liberal man prodigal relatively to the mean man, mean relatively to the prodigal. Hence also the people at the extremes push the intermediate man each over to the other, and the brave man is called rash by the coward, cowardly by the rash man, and correspondingly in the other cases.

These states being thus opposed to one another, the greatest contrariety is that of the extremes to each other, rather than to the intermediate; for these are further from each other than from the intermediate, as the great is further from the small and the small from the great than both are from the equal. Again, to the intermediate some extremes show a certain likeness, as that of rashness to courage and that of prodigality to liberality; but the extremes show the greatest unlikeness to each other; now contraries are defined as the things that are furthest from each

other, so that things that are further apart are more contrary.

To the mean in some cases the deficiency, in some the excess is more opposed; e.g. it is not rashness, which is an excess, but cowardice, which is a deficiency, that is more opposed to courage, and not insensibility, which is a deficiency, but self-indulgence, which is an excess, that is more opposed to temperance. This happens from two reasons, one being drawn from the thing itself; for because one extreme is nearer and liker to the intermediate, we oppose not this but rather its contrary to the intermediate. E.g. since rashness is thought liker and nearer to courage, and cowardice more unlike, we oppose rather the latter to courage; for things that are further from the intermediate are thought more contrary to it. This, then, is one cause, drawn from the thing itself; another is drawn from ourselves; for the things to which we ourselves more naturally tend seem more contrary to the intermediate. For instance, we ourselves tend more naturally to pleasures, and hence are more easily carried away towards self-indulgence than towards propriety. We describe as contrary to the mean, then, rather the directions in which we more often go to great

lengths; and therefore self-indulgence, which is an excess, is the more contrary to temperance.

## Part 9

That moral virtue is a mean, then, and in what sense it is so, and that it is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions, has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry- that is easy- or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.

Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it, as Calypso advises-

Hold the ship out beyond that surf and spray.

For of the extremes one is more erroneous, one

less so; therefore, since to hit the mean is hard in the extreme, we must as a second best, as people say, take the least of the evils; and this will be done best in the way we describe. But we must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and the pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent.

Now in everything the pleasant or pleasure is most to be guarded against; for we do not judge it impartially. We ought, then, to feel towards pleasure as the elders of the people felt towards Helen, and in all circumstances repeat their saying; for if we dismiss pleasure thus we are less likely to go astray. It is by doing this, then, (to sum the matter up) that we shall best be able to hit the mean.

But this is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases; for it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry; for we too

sometimes praise those who fall short and call them

good-tempered, but sometimes we praise those who get angry and call them manly. The man, however, who deviates little from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or of the less, but only the man who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed. But up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception. So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily hit the mean and what is right.

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# Discussion Questions

1. How might Aristotle's virtue ethics inform contemporary debates about morality and ethical decision making?
2. Aristotle suggests that virtue is acquired through habituation. How does this process work, and what implications does it carry for moral education?
3. Do you think Aristotle's emphasis on virtue as a mean between extremes adequately captures the complexities of moral decision making? Why or why not?
4. Reflect on a personal experience or example that illustrates the relevance or limitations of Aristotle's *golden mean*.

# Thought Experiments

## Scenario

Suppose you were to feel fearful of a particularly enthusiastic door-to-door salesman who routinely shows up at your house despite your protestations.

## Different Responses

### **Deficient response —**

**Cowardice** — The deficient response to this feeling may manifest as cowardice, as you feebly give in to the salesman's questionable sales pitch and part with your dwindling money.

### **Excessive response —**

**Rashness** — Or, perhaps the excessive response may appear as rashness, as you

unsheathe your sword and  
scream BEGONE FOUL  
SOLICITER.

**Virtuous response —  
Prudence/Courage (The  
Golden Mean)** — Ideally, you  
would exhibit the virtuous  
disposition (or *golden mean*)  
that would present as  
prudence and courage, as you  
calmly but firmly tell the  
salesmen that you are not  
interested and promptly shut  
the door.

### **Things to Consider**

**Developing virtue** — Now,  
following Aristotle, virtues  
develop through habit (a  
habitual disposition, as he calls  
it) to choose rightly rather than

wrongly. When the salesman returns (as he often does), your continual commitment to this *golden mean* frustrates him. Eventually, he recognizes your virtuous obstinacy and moves on to pester your neighbour instead, who has never read *Nicomachean Ethics*.

**Achieving *eudaimonia*** — By practicing this virtuous response consistently, you not only handle the immediate situation effectively but also cultivate character traits that produce a fulfilling and happy life. Your ability to act with prudence and courage contributes to your overall flourishing.

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## Further Reading

- “On Virtue Ethics” by Douglas Giles (2019)

<https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/on-virtue-ethics/>

## Bibliography

Aristotle. 2017. “Nicomachean Ethics” In *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy*, edited by Jeff McLaughlin. Victoria, BC: BCCampus; Kamloops, BC: Thompson River University. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/classicreadings/chapter/aristotle-on-virtue/>.

# How to Cite This Page

McCracken, Calum. 2024. "Virtue Ethics." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/virtue-ethics/>.

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# Feminist Care Ethics

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# Introduction

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Feminism, as a social movement, has championed the slogan that ‘the personal is political,’ meaning that our personal lives are intricately bound up in politics, normativity, and ethical decisions that impact not only ourselves but others as well. What is personal to someone is influenced by the choices that political organizations and institutions make because it will contribute to their greater well-being, or worsen it, and advance human rights or stifle them.

Take for example the issue of consent. In Kelly Oliver’s article, ‘Fifty Shades of Consent,’ she walks us through the troubling and provoking world of sexual consent. She argues that the current model of sexual consent is contractual in that it assumes everyone involved agrees (i.e., consents) to the sexual activity. But Oliver points out that consent is not so clear cut:

- Can a person consent when they are drunk?
- What about rape and rape culture? Does that not undermine any idea of contractual

consent?

- What about the types of 'consensual and non-consensual' sexual fantasies that pervade sexual culture?
- There is also the problem of consenting to sexual activity, but not desiring it. (Oliver 2017)

These are both personal and political questions. Underpinning this contract model of consent is the idea that it is individual's who do or do not consent. But does this individualistic account of consent really tell the whole story from the perspective of feminist ethics? Carol Gilligan does not seem to think so.

Carol Gilligan argues that we need to account for how we always have a relationship with someone, including ourselves. According to her view, we need to assess how our actions, behaviours, and choices impact those relationships. She believes that the idea of all of us as individuals making decisions according to some higher principle that does not impact others or ourselves is a narrow way to view morality and ethics. With this in mind, Gilligan asks us to consider our real life situations and how we make choices (Big Think 2012).

Making choices and being moral is messy. Sometimes, there is no good answer to a dilemma. But we cannot forget that being moral does not always mean being selfless. Sometimes, it is okay to look out for yourself.

## **Links to the Material**

- “Carol Gilligan on Women and Moral Development | Big Think” by Big Think (2012)
- “Fifty Shades of Consent: Rape Culture Versus Feminism” by Kelly Oliver (2017)

# Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with Carol Gilligan that thinking about relationships is important for morality?
2. What kind of moral obligations do we have to those we are in relationships with?
3. How far do you think our moral obligations extend to others who we might have relationships with — family? co-workers? neighbours? those who live in the same town, country, or globe?
4. How do you think you can balance moral obligations to others without self-sacrificing too much? Does this place some moral constraints on us?
5. Kelly Oliver raises important questions about the nature of consent. What are some circumstances that problematize the idea that any consent is valid consent?

# Thought Experiments

## **The Caretaker**

You are a caretaker for an elderly parent who requires constant attention. You have missed several promotions and other high paying jobs in your field and have had to put your personal needs on hold because of these caregiving responsibilities. You have the option to place your parent in a care facility, which would allow you to pursue your own goals. How should you decide what to do?

## **Invisible Labour**

Imagine a society where a significant portion of its population performs 'invisible labour,' which is vital to its

growth and success. These people are not paid or compensated for their contributions, even though if they were to stop working altogether, society would grind to a halt and collapse. Other people who do not work in this sector are paid, and while their jobs may be important to sustaining society, their work is not nearly as vital to society's overall well-being. The population performing invisible labour is never thanked for their work. They are just expected to perform these jobs.

### **The Innocent Bystander**

Suppose there is a person

whose parents and society have rigid norms and behaviours that they expect from this person. Also, suppose this person decides not to follow these norms and behaviours, instead deciding to go against them. Do you think it is morally justifiable to do so?

## Further Reading

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- *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by Nel Noddings (2013) (via the TRU Library)
- *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* by Virginia Held (2006) (via the TRU Library)

- “Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses” by Uma Narayan (1995) (via the TRU Library)
- Chapter 7 “Reconstructing Black Masculinity” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* by Bell Hooks (1992) (via the TRU Library)
- “Feminism and Feminist Ethics” by Kathryn MacKay (2019)

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# Moral Agency: Responsibility and Moral Luck

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# Introduction

Nagel's theory of moral luck explores how a myriad of external influences and antecedent circumstances problematize our conventional moral assessments. Nagel classifies this as a problem of *moral luck*, which he articulates as follows: "Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck" (Nagel 1993, 203–4).

Indeed, the issue arises from the generally accepted principle that we are only morally assessable to the extent that causal factors for which we are being assessed remain within our control (known as the *control principle*). Nagel views this principle as intuitively appealing but ultimately flawed. Through the identification of various types of moral luck — resultant, circumstantial, constitutive, and causal — Nagel

challenges our conventional assumptions by demonstrating how much of what we morally assess depends on factors *outside the agent's control*. For example, the moral culpability of a driver who has caused an accident may hinge upon random circumstances up and down the causal chain, such as the presence of a pedestrian at the moment of the accident (Nagel 1993).

Building upon Nagel's argument, Margaret Walker invites readers to reconsider conventional notions of moral agency and virtue in a world that is inherently unpredictable. Walker posits that the moral character of individuals is shaped not only by deliberate choice but also by the capricious whims of fate, rendering our agency "impure." By introducing the notion of "impure agency," which acknowledges that human actions are often shaped by external and unpredictable factors, Walker embraces a more holistic and compassionate understanding of moral responsibility (Walker 1991).

# Links to the Material

- “Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency” by Margaret U. Walker (1991)
- “Moral Luck” by Thomas Nagel (2012)

# Discussion Questions

1. What questions does Nagel raise about agency and responsibility in relation to moral luck?
2. How do external influences and antecedent circumstances impact moral assessment according to Nagel?
3. How does Kant's perspective on moral responsibility differ from Nagel's views on moral luck?
4. In what ways does Nagel's analysis deepen our understanding of moral judgment and ethical assessment?
5. What are some modern examples of constitutive luck? What about luck in circumstances that would impact a conventional moral assessment?
6. In what ways does Walker argue that integrity, grace, and lucidity are essential virtues in navigating moral luck? Walker suggests that virtues can be influenced by external factors. What are some examples of

constitutive moral luck influenced by external factors, and how does this complicate our understanding of moral character?

# Thought Experiment

## The Artist

Mette looked into the eyes of her estranged husband, but could find no flicker of remorse.

“You tell me you want us back,” she said to him. “But how can we do that when you won’t even admit that you did the wrong thing when you left me and the children?”

“Because in my heart I don’t think I did wrong, and I don’t want to lie to you,” explained Paul. “I left because I needed to get away to follow my muse. I went in the name of art. Don’t you remember when we used to talk about Gauguin and how he had to do the same? You always said he had done a hard thing, but not a wrong one.”

“But you are no Gauguin,” sighed Mette. “That’s why you’re back. You admit you failed.”

“Did Gauguin know he would succeed when he left his wife? No one can know such a thing. If he was in the right, then so was I.”

“No,” said Mette. “His gamble paid off, and so he turned out to be right. Yours didn’t, and so you turned out to be wrong.”

“His *gamble*?” replied Paul. “Are you saying luck can make the difference between right and wrong?”

Mette thought for a few moments.  
“Yes. I suppose I am.”

**Source:** The eponymous essay from *Moral Luck* by Bernard Williams in 1981. In *The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten* by Julian Baggini (2005, 289).

# Further Reading

- “Moral Luck” by Dana K. Nelkin (2023) (in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

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# Black Lives Matter and Idle No More

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Moral and ethical thinking does not just involve contemplating abstract principles; it should also guide our actions and visions of the world in which we wish to live. It involves treating others with dignity and respect as well as confronting injustice when it arises both socially and individually. But we can not do so unless we engage in critical self-reflection of the ways that we may also be complicit in furthering systems and patterns of injustice ourselves. Hence, discussions about systemic racism and colonialism are necessarily linked to discussions about morality and ethics.

In her work, *The Color of Justice*, Michelle Alexander confronts systemic racism by examining how justice is racially biased against African Americans. She examines the historical and contemporary roots of the series of laws, patterns of behaviour, and the failures of colour blindness as a social norm and policy that have led to a legal system which creates harm and perpetuates systemic racism (Alexander 2010).

In turn, Charles R. Lawrence III adopts an equally critical view of the legal system as one which has yet to deal with the problems of unconscious and culturally inoculated racial biases. Adopting a Freudian psychoanalytic framework, Lawrence walks us through how racial bias becomes embedded in our unconscious, subconscious, and eventually conscious thinking and its pernicious impacts on how law is written and implemented (Lawrence 1987).

In short, both authors challenge our views about the nature of justice and prompt us to consider the fact that our ordinary conceptions of justice have deep, racially biased problems.

## Links to the Material

- “The Color of Justice” by Michelle Alexander (2010)
- “The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Bias” by Charles R. Lawrence III (1987)

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# Discussion Questions

1. Alexander problematizes the view of justice held by many philosophers as a neutral concept. Do you agree with her assessment?
2. Can you think of other examples where justice is neutral and not neutral? Which do you think has more argumentative weight?
3. Racial bias is a deep and systemic problem in the legal system. Can you think of other unconscious biases in our social systems?
4. Do you think Lawrence's use of Freudian models of the mind hinder or strengthen his argument? Do you think it can be supported by more recent findings in psychology and neuroscience?
5. How might unconscious bias shape our moral intuitions and reasoning about other people?

# Thought Experiments

## **Who is the Parent?**

Imagine you are in a busy park, and you see a child who appears to be lost and crying. There are two adults nearby: one is dressed in professional attire and the other in casual, worn-out clothes. You need to decide who to ask for help or who might be the parent. How do you decide?

## **Missing Details**

Suppose you witness a minor crime, such as a theft, and later are asked to describe the suspect. You recall the suspect was a young person wearing a hoodie. Reflect on how you fill in the details.

## Preferential Hiring

Imagine you are hiring for a position at your company. You receive two resumes with identical qualifications, experience, and skills. The only difference is the names: one has a name that is common in your culture and the other a name distinct from those in your culture. Consider your initial reactions and preferences.

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## Further Reading

- “Non-Cartesian Sums” by

Charles Mills (1994)

- Chapter 7 “Black Women and Motherhood” by Patricia Hill Collins (1995) (in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*) (via the TRU Library)
- Chapter 4 “The Shape of Lesbian and Gay Subordination” by Cheshire Calhoun (2000) (in *Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement*) (via the TRU Library)
- *How to Recognize your White Privilege and Use it to Fight Inequality* [TED talk, 18:27 min] by Peggy McIntosh (2012)
- Letter from the Birmingham City Jail

<https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/letter-from-the-birmingham-city-jail/>

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# Intersectionality and Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+

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## Introduction

In “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” the concept of *intersectionality* stands as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s

essential contribution to the field of identity politics. Crenshaw introduces this term to illustrate the danger of traditional identity groupings. As an example, Crenshaw turns the reader's attention to the complexity of inhabiting multiple categories at the same time. Intersectionality, then, seeks to introduce an *ethical/political pragmatics of identity*, treating multiple identity categories — such as black and female — conjunctively rather than disjunctively. The resulting approach promises to improve our understanding of *social location*, which is when a person expresses their existence within the given social fabric shaped by a combination of factors or attributes, such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation, and class (Crenshaw 2013).

*Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* explores how violence suffuses into the lived experiences of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals. The report emphasizes the need for a more holistic understanding of *human security*, addressing the numerous sources of precarity that impede access to safety for these populations including, intergenerational trauma, socioeconomic

marginalization, social alienation, institutional neglect, criminalization, incarceration, and sexual exploitation, to name just a few. Importantly, it is argued that the basic lack of institutional will to enhance protections for Indigenous women and girls, is symptomatic of a latent settler-colonial practice that ignores, normalizes, and erases violence visited upon colonized bodies (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019).

The *In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in BC Healthcare* report emphasizes the need for systemic changes to ensure equitable health care experiences for all Indigenous populations. Led by the Metis Nation of British Columbia, the document's findings identify an abiding intolerance among health care employees against Indigenous and Metis individuals. In response, the report emphasizes the need to "embed Indigenous cultural safety, the practice of cultural humility, and anti-racism expectations into the core quality, accountability, and planning functions of the B.C. health care system" (50). Importantly, this report foregrounds how poor health outcomes experienced by Indigenous and Metis populations arise from a

colonial pedigree, informing the structural inequalities observed in the healthcare system today (Turpel-Lafond 2021).

## Links to the Material

- “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2013)
- *Reclaiming Power and Place: the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Chapters 7 and 8) by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019)
- *In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in BC Healthcare* by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond (2021)

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# Discussion Questions

1. Why does Crenshaw argue for an intersectional approach to understanding the experiences of woman of colour in cases of violence?
2. Within the context of the experiences of women of colour, what key concepts does Crenshaw introduce regarding identity politics and its limitations?
3. What methods does Crenshaw advocate for in order to better address violence against women of colour within the intersections of race, gender, and class?
4. In what ways can intersectionality be better understood — within the context of this chapter — to promote safety and security for Indigenous populations?
5. What are some practical steps that can be taken to promote inter-jurisdictional cooperation and

enhance safety measures for Indigenous individuals?

6. How can communities work together to enhance human security and ensure the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals?
7. What steps can be taken to ensure a more inclusive approach to justice that accounts for the intergenerational trauma, social marginalization, and institutional neglect faced by these communities?
8. How should the violent paternalism associated with colonization impact the assessment of violence faced by Indigenous women and girls?
9. In what ways does the report emphasize the need for intentional and authentic representation of Indigenous communities in provincial and regional health care policies and strategies?

10. How does the report address the historical legacy of colonialism and its impact on current health care disparities faced by Indigenous peoples in BC?
11. How does the report connect the importance of recognizing and implementing the Indigenous right to health, as articulated in United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to combat racism and achieve substantive equality in healthcare outcomes?
12. What role can intersectionality theory play in fostering culturally safe environments within the healthcare sector, pursuant to the recommendations provided in the report?

# Thought Experiments

## Scenario

Picture a courtroom. Five black female autoworkers are suing General Motors (GM) for workplace discrimination. This scenario closely mirrors the real case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (1976).

## Historical Context

In *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, the plaintiffs alleged that GM's seniority system perpetuated past discrimination, disproportionality affecting black women. The court, however, found no race or gender discrimination, noting that GM employed both black male factory workers and

white female office workers.

### **Conceptual Analysis**

The court's ruling to consider intersectionality — a concept coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, which describes how overlapping social identities, particularly minority identities, can lead to unique experiences of discrimination. Intersectionality highlights that the discrimination faced by individuals cannot always be understood through a single lens of identity.

### **Plaintiffs Perspective**

The five black female

autoworkers experienced discrimination that was not solely based on race or gender but was a result of the intersection of both identities. They faced unique prejudices and challenges in the workplace that neither black men nor white women experienced.

### **Court Decision**

The court stated the plaintiffs could not “combine statutory remedies” for race and gender discrimination. The five auto workers were essentially told to choose between being black or being a woman. What the ruling failed to consider was the unique prejudices the

plaintiffs faced for being black *and* female. In reality, their experience of discrimination was shaped by the intersection of both identities.

### **Broader Implications**

By acknowledging the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersection of multiple identities, we can work towards more comprehensive and just solutions to discrimination and misrecognition.



## Further Reading

Feminist Perspectives on Power (of particular importance is section 3.4

Intersectional Approaches) by Amy Allen (2022)

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## How to Cite This Page

McCracken, Calum. 2024. "Intersectionality and Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and

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PART III  
ETHICS BOWL CASE  
STUDIES



# Ethics Bowl Case: Too Close to Home

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# Too Close to Home

Should politicians and other public officials who make controversial decisions be allowed to cloister themselves away in their homes or should they be forced to face the jeering crowds?

This is not an abstract question. In the spring of 2023, demonstrators showed up at the homes of conservative US Supreme Court Justices to protest the judges' position on reproductive rights. Here in Canada, protestors have visited the homes of municipal, provincial, and federal politicians, including the Premier of Ontario and the Mayor of Ottawa, when they felt that their voices were not being heard through more traditional methods of protest. Those who engage in such protests argue that it is unfair to allow public figures to escape the social impact of their decisions by fleeing to what is often a beautiful residence. The fact that the measures being challenged often target those who live in sub-standard housing or are themselves homeless only adds insult to injury.

Those in charge may also try to distance themselves personally from their actions by

characterizing them as collective decisions resulting from the need to find savings or respond to complex situations. By visiting their homes, protestors make it clear that decision-makers cannot escape personal responsibility for their actions by blaming “the system.”

Those taking an opposing view would argue that a public official has a right to privacy and should be able to shed their formal persona when they return home. Should serious issues not be discussed in appropriate fora on public property not by invading what many would consider someone’s private space? And by visiting someone’s home, is there not the potential to create an atmosphere of intimidation?

There is also the question of the disruption that these protests cause to innocent bystanders, including the official’s family and neighbours. Knowing that your home and neighbourhood might be the target of protests might dissuade good people from entering public life.

Politicians and other public officials operate in an imperfect world with few easy answers. Decisions often involve difficult trade-offs and choosing the

“least worst” option. At the same time, there has been a growing tendency for public officials to try to avoid taking responsibility for decisions that have a negative impact on people’s lives, creating an accountability vacuum.

How should the public respond?

# Discussion Questions

1. How much privacy do public figures give up when they put their name on the ballot or accept an important post? Can a person in power really relinquish their formal role by merely going home?
2. During COVID, many protested vaccine mandates at politicians' homes. — Was this justified?
3. Beyond non-violence, should protesting have rules? Is protesting at a person's home always a step too far?

## Further Reading

- "Protesting Outside of Supreme Court Justices"

- Homes is Fine, Actually” by Kelsey Jost-Creegan (2022)
- “The Problem of Protesting at People’s Homes” by Andrew Fiala (2020)
  - “Editorial: Don’t Hold Your Protest Outside Politicians’ Homes” by Ottawa Sun (2020)
  - “Manor Village Tenants Take Fight Against ‘Demoviction’ for Barrhaven LRT to Mayor’s Home” by Megan Gillis (2020)

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## Attribution

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# Ethics Bowl Case: Confucius and Politeness Norms

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# Confucius and Politeness Norms

Is it morally bad to be rude? Etiquette manuals tell us that it is wrong to chew with our mouth open, to neglect to say “please” or “thank you”, and to dress inappropriately for certain occasions, such as wearing white at someone else’s wedding. Yet these norms of ordinary social interaction seem peripheral to contemporary ethics, whose focus is often on the moral status of actions like murder, lying, assault, and thievery. Ever since ancient times, great thinkers of the Western canon have been concerned about the cultivation of virtues like courage, wisdom, and justice. From this standpoint, the moral status of actions — like using the wrong fork for our entrée or refusing to shake someone’s hand — seem either trivial or outside the scope of ethics altogether. After all, these minor violations do not cause any serious harms, nor do they suggest any character vice.

Confucianism, however, considers the virtue of politeness as the core of ethical life. According to the Confucians, ritual propriety (li) encodes the

totality of morally acceptable action. On this view, fundamental moral virtues are developed through adherence to etiquette in our interpersonal interactions — failures to observe ritual are serious moral faults. Even our humanity is constituted by etiquette in some way: we begin our lives by studying ritual through observation of others around us, and only become moral agents through adherence to the rules of civil interaction. Respecting the demands of ritual, then, is tantamount to respecting each other as human beings.

Insisting on politeness, however, can seem superficial and perhaps even restrictive of human agency. The Confucians were famously strict on behaviour relating to posture, attire, and ceremony — and were criticized on grounds of inauthenticity. The Daoists, for example, thought Confucian rituals inhibited authenticity and reduced human beings to their social roles. While the Confucians argued that ideal action within ritual propriety was both spontaneous and harmonious with the natural order (much like the improvisation of a skilled musician), they also generally valued conformity to a hierarchically organized social system. Giving a central place to

etiquette in ethics, then, is broadly at odds with western conceptions of ethics, where values like liberty and autonomy are at the core of moral life. Yet politeness norms seem to saturate our ordinary experiences. We morally judge those who treat us rudely, such as by interrupting us when we speak, addressing us by the wrong names, or routinely showing up late to meetings — in short, we take rudeness to be an expression of moral disrespect.

# Discussion Questions

1. Do rules of etiquette infringe on moral agents' autonomy?
2. Is it possible to be a good person without being polite?
3. Is there something snobby or exclusionary about politeness as a virtue? Does etiquette intrinsically codify certain social differences, such as class or gender differences?
4. Is it morally justified to judge a person (especially their character) for their violations of politeness norms?
5. Is it possible to think about the ethics of politeness without reference to arbitrary cultural differences?

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- “How to Set Yourself Free With Ritual” by Alan Jay Levinovitz (2022)
- “We Need Highly Formal Rituals in Order to Make Life More Democratic” by Antone Martinho-Truswell (2020)
- “Why I Never Want to Dress Up in Black Tie Again.” by Julian Baggini (2015)

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# Ethics Bowl Case: Is There Really No Accounting for Taste?

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# Is There Really No Accounting for Taste?

We live in a complicated world where our aesthetic preferences may have ethical consequences. For example, your neighbour might prefer to keep a vibrant green lawn throughout the summer, but gardening with plants native to your area and using less water is surely better, all else being equal. Or maybe you really like the taste of this rare delicacy — which happens to be the meat of an endangered turtle.

We might also think that some aesthetic preferences reveal something about the kind of person one is: if someone is only interested in dressing in designer outfits, they might be superficial and shallow. A friend who enjoys crass comedies could also be a vulgar person. These assessments of character all relate aesthetic preferences to moral character.

We also know our aesthetic preferences can change, at least in some instances. A lot of us now like different kinds of food than we did several

years ago, and people frequently take classes to learn to appreciate modern art or classical music or hip hop. Given that our preferences might sometimes be morally charged, and we can, at least in some cases, change our preferences, do we have an ethical responsibility to examine and maybe try to change what we like?

Deliberately seeking to cultivate or broaden our tastes might make us better people. We often talk about cultivating open-mindedness, for example, because it is a generally positive trait. We could also try to change our preferences in order to develop authenticity. Many of our aesthetic preferences are inherited and reflect the prevailing impressions and injustices dominant in our society, including views about what makes a person attractive. Beauty companies contribute to these social standards and may exploit resulting insecurities for commercial interests. In such cases, it may be liberating to think about why we find certain things aesthetically pleasing, and potentially cultivating different aesthetic preferences. Even when we cannot easily change our tastes, should we nonetheless try to encourage some tastes while we discourage others as we develop our own preferences?

There are many reasons to think we are generally not responsible for our desires and preferences. We do not usually experience our own tastes as choices. Judging someone on the basis of preferences can also be dangerous. Negative characterizations of others rooted in criticism of differences in taste have often been used to justify prejudice based on class, gender identity or expression, race, and sexual orientation.

How do we navigate our aesthetic preferences when there might be ethical obstacles or consequences to what we like? Is there really no arguing over matters of taste? What, if any, standards can we apply to others and ourselves when making such judgments?

# Discussion Questions

1. Do we have a responsibility to understand where our tastes and desires come from? Do we have a responsibility to challenge them?
2. Do you judge people for their taste in music, food, or art? How does the malleability of preference affect whether or not we should engage in judging one another for them?
3. If you had radically different preferences than you do now, would you still be you?

## Further Reading

- “Review: Everyday Aesthetics” by Tom Leddy

(2009)

- “The Invalidation of the Interests of Teenage Girls and Young Women” by Anushka Mankodi (2021)
- “Judgement of People’s Moral Behaviour Varies With Their Wealth, Social Status: Study” by Randy Shore (2016)

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# Premium Healthcare

Some clinics in Canada offer private services to patients. A clinic in Calgary is now charging membership fees for enhanced levels of service: shorter wait times and longer appointments. Health Canada officials have expressed concern about how this trend may contribute to ongoing healthcare shortages, as professionals and patients experiment with more privatized economic models for accessing and providing medical care. Some might argue that people should be able to do almost whatever they want with their money — including purchasing private healthcare. Doing so does not seem to directly harm or infringe upon the rights of others.

If a Canadian citizen would have to wait over a year for a knee surgery, why should she not opt to spend her hard-earned money to get it done sooner? Must she sacrifice her time and well-being in order to wait for her turn? If she can pay privately for other services she wants, like cosmetic surgery, just to enhance her quality of our life somehow, why not include timely surgery, if she is able and willing to pay for it?

Others will point out that Canadians are rightfully proud of their public healthcare system and willing to undertake responsibilities to work together — and even maybe suffer — to support and defend it. These critics fear that privatization could compromise our public system, threaten social equity, and ultimately even reduce the quality of medical care for those left without easy access to alternatives and enhancements. Privatization could draw talent and resources away from what is available in the public system due to increased competition for professionals. This shortage could add pressure to an already stressed medical system, increasing the risk of labor shortages. If enough citizens become accustomed to opting out of public systems (or at least upgrading their care), would they continue to be sufficiently invested in making sure this system works well enough for all?

Can innovative, privatized forms of health care work to take pressure off the public system? Or do they add stress to its very foundations, potentially causing more burdens for many of us? Canada's publicly-funded health care system is certainly facing challenges, and both patients and professionals confront ethically complicated choices in the current landscape. Does the fate of

socialized healthcare depend on the ethical and personal decisions of professionals and patients facing hard choices?

# Discussion Questions

1. Under what circumstances is it ethically justifiable to opt out of the public line-up and pay for private health care?
2. Medical care can involve life-and-death situations or more ordinary choices about who to see for primary care. How do these distinctions matter to our case for either opting out or staying within the public system when seeking medical treatment?
3. What can Canada learn from the way other nations design, fund, and defend public medicine and socialized medical systems?

# Further Reading

- “Understanding Public and Private Health Care” by the Canadian Medical Association (n.d.)
- “Converting Doctor’s Offices to Premium Clinics Could Spawn a New Health-Care Crisis” by Jason Markusoff (2023)
- “Myth: “Privatization” Can Help Everyone Access Health Care” by Canadian Doctors for Medicare (n.d.)

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## Progressive Fines

Finland has found a creative way of trying to curb

speeding. Instead of imposing a set fine, authorities base the penalty for speeding on the driver's disposable income. A record of annual income is used to determine a "fair" fine for the speeder — the richer you are, the more you pay. This system aims to equalize the punishment associated with violating the speed limit and make sure that everyone feels a similar amount of financial "pain."

Could a progressive system for fines work in Canada? Should the rich pay more if they are caught committing any number of non-criminal activities like speeding; fishing or hunting out of season; or liquor violations? Would people be likely to accept a system in which there are different rates of pay for the very same violation? Would such a system be too complicated?

Tax collection is progressive, and those who have more pay more, but fees and fines are traditionally applied equally to anyone who violates the rules in question. Fines that are merely inconvenient for the wealthiest citizens may pose more significant punishments for those living on tight budgets. Economic constraints can easily lead those who cannot pay on time to become drawn further into

debt and potentially even into court. The spiralling costs of this struggle to comply can overwhelm household resources, derail plans, and devastate well-planned budgets.

For the most fortunate, in contrast, fines and fees are potentially so easily managed that they hardly work to deter rule-breaking. Dutch rapper Lil Klein posted on Instagram that his wealth allows him to do as he likes and 'eat fines for breakfast.' His comment implies that the rules may apply to him equally, but their application does not really matter to him. Should we consider alternate ways to make sure everyone is at least sufficiently deterred from being reckless and breaking rules?

While some view a progressive system of fines as a great way to create equity among those that get caught, others fear that applying progressive fines is unfair to the rich because it treats equally socially disruptive activities differently, depending on the wealth of those involved. Our justice system is predicated on individual equality. Can monetary punishments ever uphold this principle?

# Discussion Questions

1. What should the purpose be of fines, or punishments in general? Would income-based fines really change behaviour?
2. Jurisdictions across North America are increasingly turning to fines as significant sources of public funding. Does this revenue generating strategy create any obligations to make the financial burdens of fines and fees more equitable? Is it even ethical to make funding for public goods dependent on people engaging in risky or inappropriate behaviour that can be fined in the first place?
3. Could inquiring into the personal wealth of someone who gets caught speeding or littering risk violating privacy?

# Further Reading

- “Finland’s “Progressive Punishment” When It Comes to Speeding Tickets” by Euronews (2023)
- “Should the Rich Pay Higher Fines?” by Amsterdam Law School (2023)
- “Billionaire’s EUR 25,000 Drink Driving Fine Puts Means-tested Penalties in the Spotlight” by European Transport Safety Council (2017)

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# Ethics Bowl Case: What is it to Harm Someone? The Sneaky Cheater and Other

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# What is it to Harm Someone? The Sneaky Cheater and Other Considerations

Imagine you are in a monogamous romantic relationship and your partner cheats on you. Imagine, further, that you will never find out unless they tell you. If they never confess to their actions, have you been harmed?

Many people respond, 'yes, of course I have been harmed!' to this question. This answer implies that we can be harmed without knowing that we have been harmed. But others think that harm necessarily involves an experience on the part of the person being harmed. So, in the scenario above, it seems that unless you actually experience the harm of your partner cheating on you, you would not be harmed by it. Perhaps, in this case, you do experience the harm, but you experience it without knowing it: your partner might change the way they interact with you, and while you might attribute this change to another cause,

unbeknownst to you, the actual cause for their change in behaviour is their unfaithful actions. But if you could have a guarantee that you would not experience any harm — let us suppose your partner does not change their behaviour at all — have you really been harmed at all?

This question has importance in our lives past the case of the sneaky cheater. For instance, if we cannot be harmed unless we (knowingly or unknowingly) experience the harm, then, if an afterlife does not exist, the dead cannot be harmed. This calls into question the moral standing of the command to respect the wishes of the dead, often done through honouring the contents of people's wills.

If we can be harmed even when we do not experience the harm, consider the case where someone has a morally problematic belief, but it is one they never act on. Are gay, lesbian, and bisexual people being harmed by those who believe that romantically loving someone who is not of the 'opposite' gender is wrong but never act (knowingly or unknowingly) on this belief? In this case and others like it, not only is the potential harm not experienced as harmful, it has no

corresponding action at all. If harm does not require us to experience it, does it require an action at all? Can beliefs, on their own, be harmful?

# Discussion Questions

1. Does harm necessarily involve an experience of being harmed? Must this experience be one we are aware of?
2. If experience of harm is not necessary for harm itself, what is it to harm someone? What makes harm so morally significant?
3. Can you think of considerations other than the experience of harm that are relevant to determining whether or not someone has been harmed?
4. Can you be wronged even if you are not (knowingly or unknowingly) harmed?

# Further Reading

- “What Could We Owe to the Dead?” by Jared Smith (2022)
- “Can Beliefs be Morally Wrong?” by Lewis Ross (2021)

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# Bad Behaviour in Parliament

In a society that demands employers provide a safe working environment devoid of harassment, there appears to be a holdout — Canada’s House of Commons, particularly during the daily Question Period. Behaviours that would be considered unacceptable in the classrooms or workplaces of those watching, such as heckling, name-calling, and insults, are commonplace.

A recent Toronto Star survey found that this activity is on the increase. MPs frequently refer to each other as “liars” and in one recent case a “monkey.” MPs have accused their colleagues of believing in conspiracy theories by claiming they wear “tin foil hats,” and some MPs have been falsely accused of supporting the terrorist organization Hamas or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is just a small sample, and although the Speaker often chastises MPs for using such language, by that point, the damage has been done.

Female and racialized parliamentarians have been

particularly vocal about how they are often the target of sexist and racist insults. A survey by the thinktank Samara on civility in the House of Commons found that “female MPs were more likely than men to report hearing heckles, especially about gender, appearance, age and language.” The same survey noted that two-thirds of Canadians want the system “reformed and improved.” Is it that simple?

The goal of an elected official is to implement a set of policies. If they are in government, they can only continue to do that by maintaining power. If they are in opposition, they need to defeat the government of the day. To do either involves engaging voters, usually through media coverage or capturing the public’s attention through social media posts.

In a world inundated with information and dominated by complex issues, often the only way to garner public attention is through dramatic behaviour that vilifies your opponent and exaggerates your own virtue. Question Period is much more about psychological warfare than an exchange of information. Opposition parties try to make news by destabilizing the government, and

governments try to minimize news by discrediting the opposition. The short time frame of each exchange does not help matters, making it virtually impossible to engage in serious discussion of complex matters.

Is bad behaviour simply an inevitable by-product of such a system?

# Discussion Questions

1. Is it legitimate for politicians to engage in uncivil behaviour to gain the attention of the media and public?
2. Is someone encouraging poor behaviour by an MP by liking or circulating a social media post of them insulting a colleague in the House of Commons?
3. To what extent is their poor behaviour the fault of a public that often elects or re-elects the party that has done the best job of vilifying their opponents?
4. Should parliamentary assemblies be treated like other workplaces and have zero tolerance for harassment, name calling, and insults?

# Further Reading

- “Cheering or Jeering? Members of Parliament Open Up About Civility in the House of Commons” by Samara Canada (2016)
- “Question Period is About Psychological Warfare” by John Milloy (2024)
- “‘Boorish and Rude’: Conservatives Heckle House Speaker During Speech on Ills of Heckling” by Rachel Aiello (2023)

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# Ethics Bowl Case: Freedom of Expression in the Legislature

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# Freedom of Expression in the Legislature

In the fall of 2023, the Ontario Legislature voted to censure Sarah Jama, the elected Member of Provincial Parliament for Hamilton Mountain. Under the terms of the censure motion, Jama would not be allowed to speak in the Legislature until she made a formal apology to the Legislature and deleted certain social media posts related to the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel and the Israeli military response.

Jama's first post, issued just days after the attack, called for an immediate cease-fire in the conflict, failing to mention the actions of Hamas and characterizing Israel as a settler-colonial state that engaged in apartheid toward its Palestinian population. The post garnered considerable negative media attention, particularly its failure to mention Israeli victims, and some decried it as being antisemitic. Although Jama refused to delete the post, she apologized in subsequent posts for not mentioning the initial attacks and condemned

Hamas' actions while also criticizing Israel's attack on Gaza.

Those calling for her censure believed that her remarks placed the Legislature in disrepute and that a serious response was required. Her words were seen as hurtful, particularly to Ontario's Jewish community, and unacceptable coming from an elected representative. They argued that that inaction on the part of the Legislature would have only added to the harm.

Others pointed out that even though many disagreed with her views, her position reflected one held by many Ontarians.

The Jama censure raises a more fundamental issue. If members of the Legislature disagreed with Jama, should they have used the Legislature as a forum to debate her ideas and respond with counterarguments instead of censuring her? There is also the question of her representative function. By depriving her of the opportunity to speak in the legislature, residents of the constituency that elected Jama are not fully represented at Queen's Park. Was the Ontario Legislature right to deny Jama the right to participate in its discussions?

# Discussion Questions

1. Are there limits to what an elected representative can say on any subject? Who should decide those limits?
2. Does a legislative body have a responsibility to ensure its members adhere to certain standards of behaviour? Is it ever right for a legislative body to silence an elected member because of their words or actions?
3. Should the norms of free speech change when dealing with an extremely controversial issue like the conflict in the Middle East?
4. Is it appropriate to try to coerce someone into giving an apology for strongly held beliefs?

# Further Reading

- Hon. Paul Calandra, remarks in the Ontario Legislature on the Censure of Sarah Jama MPP on October 18, 2023
- “Chris Selley: It’s up to Voters to Discipline Sarah Jama, Not the Ontario Legislature” by Chris Selley (2023)
- “Sarah Jama’s Censure: Making People Feel Uncomfortable Is Part of the Job” by Ali N. Nadiya (2023)

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# Ethics Bowl Case: Do Grades Capture Learning?

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# Do Grades Capture Learning?

Starting in the fall of 2023, all K–9 students in British Columbia public schools were assessed with the Education Ministry’s new four-point proficiency scale, which replaced the long-standing letter grade system. Instead of traditional As, Bs, and Cs, the new report cards read either Emerging, Developing, Proficient, or Extending. This paradigm shift from the Ministry of Education reflects the latest attempt in correcting the deficiencies of the previous system — with letter grades indicating no further level of achievement for high-performing students and demotivating low-performing students away from the learning process altogether. Letting go of the previous model, however, proved difficult for teachers, students, and parents to whom letter-grades or otherwise quantified scales of assessment all seem embedded into the very notion of standardized education.

Of course, learning on its own does not require evaluation of any kind. If you successfully teach

yourself to strum out complex chords on the guitar, mix rich hues in watercolour, or edit a YouTube video with cool transitions, nobody will grade you on your accomplishment. You will not even think of your skills along a GPA scale — despite having learned something impressive and valuable. Yet the grading system as an artificial institutional tool is regarded as necessary because it renders massive quantities of data legible to a large-scale education system. Answering questions such as which schools should receive funding, which students should be accepted into which universities, and so forth all require an external evaluative standard.

Grading scales are not the only means by which institutional methods of evaluation creep into our personal values. Some philosophers are now talking about the concept of value capture, which is what happens when a simplified, easily-trackable measure of our values replaces the real, nuanced, and complicated values, and we start pursuing the simplified version, sometimes to the detriment of the actual goal. For example, someone might become obsessed with Fitbit metrics (instead of overall health), Duolingo streaks (instead of

language acquisition), and followers on social media (instead of social well-being).

While these measurements offer easily digestible — perhaps even seductive — proof of our successes, internalizing this kind of institutional metric can be damaging to our autonomy and values. When we become obsessed with external assessment, we forgo experiences that elude straightforward quantification (such as enjoying a good book or visiting a friend) and deprioritize the actual value of our goals (learning) over its measured counterpart (grades).

Where it concerns grading in public high schools, there are even further questions concerning the ultimate and instrumental ends of education and the kind of influence a government ought to have over these goals. Knowledge, of course, is good in itself and good for other purposes: learning to read enables a human being both to appreciate literature and to find a job. What role an external system of evaluation might play in achieving these goals and how that system ought to be designed, however, is a matter of ongoing disagreement.

# Discussion Questions

1. Imagine that throughout your life you had never been graded, in school or anywhere else. How might your learning experiences have been different? In which ways better, and in which ways worse?
2. Is the new evaluative system in British Columbia an effective way of circumventing the problems of grading?
3. Do grading and other forms of external evaluation always distort the things that they measure? Or, is the issue more about the way we interpret and internalize the grades?
4. Do the arguments against grading also count against testing in general?
5. Are all human values equally suited for external evaluation? Take, for example, the difference between the hard sciences and the humanities — is performance in one area more appropriate for measurement than

the other? If so, why?

## Further Reading

- “BC Has Ended Letter Grades. Here’s the Argument for Doing So” by Victor Brar (2023)
- “Teacher, Bureaucrat, Cop (Guest Post)” by C. Thi Nguyen (2022)
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PART IV

# FURTHER READING



# What's in It for Me? On Egoism and Social Contract Theory

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## Introduction

An egoist is known for their big ego. They are self-centered and care little about others. If you google the word

“egoist,” almost all webpages that pop up teach you how to deal with them if you are so unfortunate as to encounter one. Given such negative connotations, it might surprise you to learn that some philosophers, who are called “ethical egoists,” argue that to act morally is to maximize one’s self-interest.

At least on the surface, being ethical is not all about seeking self-interest. Morality requires us, for example, to keep promises, treat others fairly, and benefit those in need. It demands that we not act in our self-interest, even if we can get advantages by breaking promises, treating others unfairly, or not helping the needy. Why, then, should we follow ethical norms that restrict our choices? What exactly is the relationship between ethics and self-interest?

This last question is the central question that we will focus on in this chapter. We will see how three different views — known as psychological egoism, ethical egoism, and social contract theory — address this question. Before we dive into details about each theory, here is a rough picture:

- **Psychological egoism** claims that true

altruistic behaviour is nothing more than wishful thinking because everything we do *is by definition* self-serving.

- **Ethical egoism** goes a step further, arguing that even if we could be unselfish, we can ignore any demand that ethics makes on us because we *should* put ourselves first.
- **Social contract theory** claims ethics itself is rooted in self-interest; specifically, we should take others into account, but only because doing so is, ultimately, in accord with what we want and need for ourselves.

## Psychological Egoism

Psychological egoists argue that everything we do is self-serving, even if we may think it is not. Self-sacrificial behaviours, such as using oneself as a human shield to protect others in a mass shooting, cannot disprove psychological egoism because people who sacrifice themselves are not motivated by altruistic concern. Rather, they simply do what they most want to do. Sacrificing one's life happens to be what one most wanted to do in those

circumstances. Given that doing what one most wants to do is in one's self-interest, one's "self-sacrificing" behaviour is again egoistic. Altruism is nothing but an illusion.

However, if doing what we are motivated to do is always self-serving, then trivially there is a sense in which all our actions are self-serving. To avoid this charge, an egoist needs to avoid interpreting psychological egoism as saying that whatever the action one intends to do, it is, by definition, always self-serving. Perhaps a better strategy for a psychological egoist is to emphasize that one does action *x* always *in order to* further one's self-interest. We act only *for the sake of* promoting our own best interest.

Many philosophers agree that the ultimate goal of one's action is to further one's best interest; what they disagree on is how to understand the idea of "one's best interest." Aristotle (384–322 BCE), for example, argues that *eudaimonia* (his term for the "happiness" that arises from a completely fulfilled life) is a rational agent's ultimate goal. Stoics, on the other hand, argue for virtuous or excellent activities without pleasure. Still others, like Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), argue that the ultimate goal

of one's actions is to realize or develop oneself. To make this idea appealing, an egoist must flesh out the idea of self-realization or self-development, which, in turn, involves specifying what is *ideal* to pursue.

Max Stirner (1806–1856) proposes that the ultimate goal of one's action is self-governance, and to achieve it, one need *not* take others' interests into consideration.<sup>1</sup> To Stirner, "I" is absolute:

For me, you are nothing but—my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you. We have only one relation to each other, that of *usableness*, of utility, of use. We owe each other nothing, for what I seem to owe you I owe at most to myself.  
(Stirner [1844] 1995, 263)

If we accept the psychological egoist view that one's ultimate goal is always one's own self-interest, Stirner's picture of human interaction may not surprise you. Any moral obligation to others

1.<sup>2</sup>

2. [1]

is subject to one's own self-interest. As he puts it, "one must break faith, yes, even his oath, in order to determine himself instead of being determined by moral considerations" (210). Acting for the sake of another person's interest is impossible.

One of the chief objections to psychological egoism is that it is an example of a non-falsifiable theory. It is very unlikely that one can know for certain how much one's own motivation is of egoistic or altruistic concern. This difficulty has to do with the fact that one can hardly know *for sure* about one's own deep-down motivation. It can work in both ways.

On the one hand, it gives psychological egoists an opportunity to argue that even a person who emphasizes that they do charity for an altruistic reason might, deep down, deceive themselves. On the other hand, precisely because it is difficult to be certain about one's own deep-down motivation, psychological egoists' assumption that deep down we are all self-serving seems unwarranted. A recent empirical study even challenges the dichotomy between egoism and altruism by showing that people who are capable of

expressing extreme altruism are labeled high in narcissism (White, Szabo, and Tiliopoulos 2018).

Here are the key takeaway points: psychological egoists attempt to persuade us that we can never be truly altruistic, and hence, a truly realistic account of human behaviour would have no place for anything remotely resembling ethics if “ethics” requires us, at least sometimes, *not* to pursue our own self-interest. But given that we can hardly know for sure our own deep-down motivation, we might still be altruistic. On the other hand, ethical egoism argues that even if we can, we *should* not be altruistic.

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## Ethical Egoism

While psychological egoism claims that the ultimate goal of one’s action *is* one’s own self-interest, ethical egoism claims that one *should* pursue one’s own best interest. The basic idea of ethical egoism is this: promoting one’s own best interest is in accord with morality. In its strongest

form, ethical egoism claims that one acts morally if and only if one promotes one's own best interest. In this section, we will discuss and evaluate Adam Smith's and Ayn Rand's ethical egoistic claims. We will end up learning the biggest problem with ethical egoism, which serves as a transition to our next topic: the social contract theory.

Adam Smith (1723–1790) famously argues for egoism as a practical ideal in economics: each businessperson promoting their best interest would most effectively promote the common good, given that the “invisible hand” (i.e. free market) would coordinate individual economic activities. In other words, if both buyers and sellers pursue nothing but the best deal for themselves, a win-win situation will ensue.

Another daily-life example of how ethical egoism brings out the socially optimal outcome is competitive sports. The fact that each team is out to win produces the optimal outcome: if the players played without keeping score, or if the weaker team reaped the same rewards, the game would be boring to watch and the players would not reach their full potential. In other words, only when every player promotes their best interest (i.e.

playing to win) would the best outcome ensue (i.e. we will enjoy watching the game and the players will reach their potential).

According to Smith, the successful function of the invisible hand depends on laissez-faire capitalism. He bases his analysis of social institutions and behaviour upon principles of human action, the starting point of which is a form of ethical egoism:

Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so." (Smith [1759] 1976, 82)

Although he believes that one should first pursue one's own best interest, Smith does not advocate being a selfish, cold-blooded person. Instead, he argues that mutual kindness is necessary for happiness (Smith [1759] 1976, 225). Starting from our natural drive of trying to share others' feelings as closely as possible, we adjust our feelings to the feelings of people we are concerned with, and in this process, we eventually develop virtues (110–133, 135–136). Of two principal virtues —

justice and beneficence — the exercise of beneficence “deserves highest reward” (81).

Here is a rough picture: given our natural drives and social condition, we are on the path of developing virtues, the most important of which is beneficence. Yet given that mutual kindness is necessary for happiness, we can say that practicing kindness is necessary for one’s own best interest. In benefiting another person, one is still pursuing one’s own self-interest.<sup>3</sup>

However, Ayn Rand (1905-1982), who also argues for ethical egoism and laissez-faire capitalism, argues that selfishness is a virtue. Altruism, which demands self-sacrifice, is even immoral. According to her, life is the ultimate value, and hence, “no society can be of value to man’s life if the price is the surrender of his right to his life” (Rand 1964, 32). Concerned for the survival of civilization, she condemns altruism for being responsible for destroying the civilized world. Altruism is also responsible for making totalitarian regimes, such

3.<sup>4</sup>

4. [2]

as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, possible, given that altruism holds:

*death* as its ultimate goal and standard of value—and it is logical that renunciation, resignation, self-denial, and every other form of suffering, including self-destruction, are the virtues it advocates. (Rand 1964, 34–35)

Given that humans are rational beings and that life is the ultimate value, “rational selfishness” is what one should pursue (Rand 1964, 25–31). To act rationally is to put one’s own interest first. According to Rand, not only is promoting one’s own best interest rational, it is also morally correct.

Without the burden of proving empirically that everyone must always act out of self-interest, ethical egoism is more appealing than psychological egoism. However, the biggest challenge to ethical egoism is that it lacks the authoritative regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest.

Here is an example to illustrate this point. Suppose your grandfather indicated in his will that you are his sole heir, and suppose also that he is not

bothered by any severe sickness. Suppose your cousin has been working her way to replace you as the sole heir and suppose that you are in a bad situation which requires a lot of money that you do not have. Would it be morally wrong for you to kill your grandfather to ensure that you receive the money now? Ethical egoism cannot answer this question because, from your perspective, it would not be morally wrong, but from your grandfather's perspective, it would be. There is no way to adjudicate between these perspectives.

Someone might also argue that ethical egoism borders on being incoherent. If what ethical egoism advocates for is that everyone should do what is in their best interest, it seems confusing, if not outright inconsistent, that ethical egoism argues that doing so is how we promote the social good (i.e., the good that goes beyond the scope of self-interest). It seems self-contradictory to care about promoting social good while only caring about promoting one's own best interest. Whether this objection is damaging to ethical egoism depends on whether promoting social good is fundamentally incompatible with promoting one's own best interest.

Smith apparently thinks that they are not fundamentally incompatible because he finds a way to incorporate the virtue of benevolence into his ethical egoism. Whether he is successful in doing that (i.e. whether his assumption that we have a natural tendency to care about others' welfare fits well with ethical egoism) is another question. But the challenge seems to apply to Rand. If, as Rand argues, one should promote one's own good and altruism is immoral, then it is confusing as to why she concerns herself with the issue of the survival of civilization (which presumably promotes the common good).

The biggest problem with ethical egoism is that it fails to be a moral theory because it cannot deal with interpersonal conflicts of interest. Only asking people to pursue their individual interests is not enough. As countless examples show, we can all benefit much more from cooperation. The issue of coordination is crucial given interpersonal conflicts of interest. Concern for coordination leads us to the last topic of this chapter: social contract theory.

# Social Contract Theory

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The basic idea of social contract theory in ethics is that ethical rules are sets of conventionally established limits we impose on ourselves in keeping with our own longer-term interests. This answers two fundamental questions about morality; namely, what is required, and why we should obey. What is morally required is what we, as rational and self-interested agents, do or would agree upon. The reason why we should obey is because we have agreed, or would do so if we were being fully rational.

Social contract theory shares the core assumption of egoism that we are self-interested and rational agents. However, realizing that living together in a society requires a set of rules for social cooperation, social contract theory provides a justification for why we should coordinate with others. Unlike egoism, which cannot provide an impartial regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest, social contract theory not only provides

a way to handle conflicts of interest but also a justification for it. Given extra assumptions about human nature, we might end up following Thomas Hobbes or John Rawls. But both agree that moral rules are essentially conventional and binding only to the degree that we see them as serving our own interests.

If moral and social rules are conventional, what would life be like without such rules, and how would this establish a motivation for defining and then following such rules? In particular, given that we are self-interested, why would we agree to obey a set of rules that sometimes limit our own self-interest? According to Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), the pre-political natural state of humanity, which he imagines as “the state of nature,” is a war of all against all, in which people’s lives are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 89). This miserable picture is derived from the following empirical and normative assumptions:

- His **empirical assumptions** are that people are sufficiently similar in their physical and mental faculties that no one is invulnerable and we all fear death (Hobbes [1651] 1996,

86-87, 90).

- His **normative assumptions** are that each person in the state of nature has the liberty to preserve their own lives and a right to do whatever in one's opinion is necessary for survival; he calls it "the right of nature." There is no constraint on the right of nature; "every man has a right to everything, even to one another's body" (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 91).

Given that resources are limited and we are all vulnerable in the process of exerting our rights of nature, Hobbes paints the state of nature as hell. Hobbes, then, envisions that we start to form social conventions based on mutual advantage. For example, although in the state of nature there is nothing inherently wrong in harming someone, you would be better off by refraining to do so if everyone else does the same. A social convention against injury is thus formed. Hobbes calls such a convention "a law of nature." The fundamental law of nature is "to seek peace, and follow it," whereas the upshot of the entire set of laws of nature is "that law of the Gospel: 'whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them'" (92). In short, Hobbes's social contract theory

claims that moral requirements are nothing but social conventions that we, as rational and self-interested agents, agree upon for the sake of survival. Given that everyone's life is vulnerable in the state of nature, it is mutually advantageous to obey the social convention (Hobbes [1651] 1996).

As a reader, you might wonder whether Hobbes's story of the state of nature ever happened. But how damaging is it to his moral theory if it turns out that in history people were never in the state of nature? Some people adopt a hypothetical strategy, arguing that people would have agreed upon the laws of nature were they in the state of nature. But a hypothetical agreement lacks the strength of a real agreement. Someone cannot demand you fulfill a hypothetical agreement that you financially support them for the rest of their life, even if doing so would be in your best interest, because you and them did not *actually* agree to this at a prior time. As far as we can see, the real problem is whether understanding moral requirements as social conventions, the obeying of which is of mutual advantage, has enough force to ensure that everyone does obey.

David Gauthier, a contemporary Hobbesian,

argues that social conventions agreed upon as moral requirements are derived from a bargaining process over mutually advantageous conventions. Given that social conventions are derived from bargaining, people with the upper hand have little incentive to produce a fair convention for the weak. After all, there is little to gain from cooperating with the weak and little to fear of their retaliation. Even if a fair convention that takes care of the interests of the weak is agreed upon, it does not guarantee that the strong will obey. After all, whether it is advantageous to follow a particular convention also depends on one's bargaining power (Gauthier 1986).

In Gauthier's theory, defenseless or people with disabilities "fall beyond the pale" of morality (Gauthier 1986, 268). That is to say, moral constraints will only arise if people are roughly equal in power. Were you a person with disabilities, you would be left out of moral consideration. This seems to push us back to a situation close to Hobbes's state of nature, where the strong exploits the weak. If moral requirements are all about the strong exploiting the weak, we do not even need to call them

“requirements” because humans easily, if not naturally, act that way (Gauthier 1986).

Another contemporary social contract theory — Kantian contractarianism — has an entirely different outlook even though it shares the same assumption that we are rational and self-interested agents. Kantian contractarianism bases the social contract on a natural equality of moral status, which makes each person’s interests a matter of impartial concern. It has roots in Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1807) moral theory, which takes each person as “an end in itself” and an intrinsically valuable moral status as well as demands each person act in accord with universalizable personal policies (which Kant calls “maxims”) as a member of the community (Kant [1785] 2002).

Following Kant’s idea that our equal status (as an end in itself) demands us to act in an impartial way in a community, John Rawls (1921–2002) develops a social contract theory that answers the question “What terms of cooperation would free and equal citizens agree to under fair conditions?” Whereas Hobbes’s social contract is based on the state of nature, Rawls’s is based on “the original position of

equality," where people, as free and equal beings, collectively figure out the social contract that they agree upon. To avoid the strong having dominant bargaining power over the weak in the process as Gauthier paints it, Rawls stipulates that people in the original position make the bargain under a "veil of ignorance"; that is, people have no idea of their natural talents and social position. Because people are not aware of any natural or social differences between them, they are equal and more likely to act toward each other in a non-biased, impartial way (Rawls 1971).

Notice that Rawls's idea of the "original position" does not refer to any actual historical event. Rather, it is a device that helps us vividly imagine a fair and impartial point of view when we reason about fundamental principles of justice. To maximize one's own best interest in this condition, Rawls believes people will come up with and endorse a fair contract in an impartial way. If inequality is unavoidable, it must be justified to those made worse off and perhaps even subject to their veto. Hence, vulnerable people will not be excluded from the domain of morality, as they will be in Gauthier's picture. Rawls assumes that people will act benevolently if they are rational,

self-interested, and behind the veil of ignorance. Thus, the original position “represents equality between human beings as moral persons” (Rawls 1971, 190).

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## Conclusion

Although it is hard to prove that everyone must always act out of self-interest, it is probably true that we have *the tendency* to act for the sake of promoting our own best interest. The starting point of both egoism and social contract theory is that we are self-interested and rational beings. However, basing morality on self-interest alone does not get us far and even defeats the idea of morality. Why should we continue to follow moral rules in cases where following them would not in fact be in our personal best interest?

A social contract theory — be it Hobbes’s, Gauthier’s, or Rawls’s — can still suffer from the prisoner’s dilemma, where everyone rationally acts in a self-interested way even when doing so is

detrimental to the good of all involved.<sup>5</sup> For example, say your roommate and you agree that it is best if everyone helps keep the place clean. Out of self-interest, it is rational for each of you to find some excuse not to clean up. As a result, no one *actually* keeps the agreement and your place is probably a mess. Thus, moral requirements based on agreement still lack sufficient force to ensure that everyone in fact does comply.

Why *should* we follow norms that restrict our choices in certain cases? In the previous chapters, we have seen that the authority of cultural norms, religious rules, and appeals to nature do not conclusively show why it is that we should follow the rules. In this chapter, we have seen that appealing to self-interest is also not sufficient to account for such rules. Instead, we need to derive more objective ethical principles from reason. Rawls's Kantian idea is a move toward objective and impartial ethical principles. The following chapters explore other philosophers who base such principles upon reason.

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6. [3]

1. Whether Max Stirner is a psychological egoist is disputed. David Leopold, for example, argues that he is not. (For Leopold's argument, see Stirner 1995, xxiv–xxv). ←
2. We should note that Smith is not a thoroughgoing egoist who argues that morality is founded upon self-interest. According to Smith, moral rules stipulate what is fit and proper to be done or to be avoided and these rules are not dictated by self-love (159). It is the "impartial spectator," not self-love, that shows us "the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others" (137). ←
3. How Jean Hampton criticized Hobbes can also apply to contemporary contractarianism. She doubts whether having a social contract can indeed function as well as intended. Suppose the war of all against all is triggered by greed or fear; there is no guarantee that a person who was greedy before the contract is drawn up will stop being greedy after the contract is drawn up. Moreover, having a social contract seems to not guarantee that we can be entirely free of the prisoner's dilemma. That is, given that there is no guarantee that

another person will keep their end of the bargain, it is better for you not to keep your end of the bargain. No matter how harsh a punishment we set up for a contract violator, there is always someone who is willing to take the risk. In short, Hampton's point is that whatever makes a person unable to cooperate before a contract is drawn up might not go away after a contract is drawn up. A contractarian cannot guarantee that (Hampton, 1986). Gauthier's response is that a contract can avoid the problem if the contractors realize that they are in an environment of like-minded individuals (Gauthier 1986, 160-166). Whether Gauthier's response really solves the problem, however, is disputed (see Vallentyne 1991). ←

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## How to Cite This Page

Kao, Ya-Yun (Sherry). 2024. "What's in It for Me? On Egoism and Social Contract Theory." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/on-egoism-and-social-contract-theory/>.

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## Introduction

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This chapter deals with an important question in meta-ethics. **Meta-ethics** is the branch of ethics that deals with the nature of morality. It tries to answer the questions:

- What is morality?
- Is morality objective?
- Where does it come from?
- What is the relationship between moral facts, if they exist, and this physical world that we interact with?

And so, before we figure out how we ought to be and live, we must first establish whether there even is such a thing as the way we *ought* to be and live in the first place. One of the most important questions in meta-ethics is whether there is a moral reality that obligates us — regardless of our judgments, opinions, and beliefs — and whether there are moral facts that are necessarily and universally true. Perhaps ethical codes are merely relative to groups of people. Perhaps there is no true and binding objective morality outside of culture, time period, and personal preferences. Is morality objective and universal? Or is it merely a matter of opinion and tradition?

## Three Kinds of Relativism

### Descriptive Relativism

The mildest and least controversial form of relativism is **descriptive relativism**. According to descriptive relativism, moralities and ethical codes

are radically different across cultures — and we can observe this. For example, some cultures:

- See homosexuality as immoral, while others do not
- Think that polygamy is morally acceptable (and should even be encouraged), while others see monogamy as the moral ideal
- Practice slavery, while others find slavery morally abhorrent
- And so on

This ethical diversity is not only observed and documented now by cultural anthropologists, but even ancient writers, like Herodotus and some ancient Greek skeptics, recognized the different ways that cultures conducted marriage, burials, military discipline, and social participation.

Those who adhere merely to descriptive relativism maintain the view that moral rules are observably dissimilar across cultures. For some relativists, this suggests the falsity of moral objectivity and is used as evidence in favor of stronger versions of relativism. Not all relativists argue that descriptive relativism is evidence against moral objectivity, but relativism often starts out from the truth of

descriptive relativism and makes stronger claims about moral relativity on this basis. In other words, the observation of differing moral codes across cultures does not necessarily mean that morality is relative, but some relativists use this anthropological fact as evidence for the stronger conclusions about relativism that we will look at below.

## Meta-Ethical Relativism

The ancient writer Herodotus famously said, “Culture is king,” based on his observations of disparate cultural moralities (Histories 3.38.4).<sup>1</sup> Upon observing radical differences in the ways that different cultures practiced religion, burial, household organization, and even eating preferences, he concluded that no standard exists beyond a culture to prescribe good and bad behaviour. Thus, culture is king.

Unlike descriptive relativism, **meta-ethical**

1. <sup>2</sup>

2. [1]

**relativism** makes this kind of stronger claim about the nature of moral truth. Meta-ethical relativism says that moral truths are actually only true relative to specific groups of people. This means that whether a moral belief is true is dependent on, or *relative to*, the standpoint of the person or culture that has the belief. Someone in Singapore and someone in England can both say, “It is sunny outside,” but it is possible that the claim is only true for one of them. In a similar way, meta-ethical relativism is the position that ethical statements are only true relative to the context that they are spoken.

In other words, when someone claims that some practice *x* is moral, then the claim is true if their culture believes and lives as if *x* is moral. For example, if a culture holds the view that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral, then for that culture, it is true that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral. On the other hand, for the culture that believes it is morally acceptable to have pre-marital sexual relations, then “having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral” is false.

Notice that this is different from saying, “lying might be morally permissible in certain situations,

such as when a murderous axe-man asks you where your family is hiding.” Meta-ethical relativism is not about this kind of situation-specific method of determining what is moral. Rather, it says that moral beliefs and claims are true or false relative to the cultures or standpoints in which they exist.

## Normative Relativism

Finally, we will look at the strongest kind of relativism: **normative relativism**. It is the strongest kind of relativism because it goes beyond descriptive and meta-ethical relativism and makes an even grander claim. According to normative relativism, no person or culture ought to judge the ethical codes of other cultures as being inferior, nor should any culture intervene in another culture to prevent it from carrying out the specifics of its ethical code. The normative relativist says that we might prefer the specific morality of our culture and even be able to offer reasons for doing so, but this does not imply that ours is superior to that of others. Normative relativists

argue that because no objective, independent standpoint from which to evaluate ethical codes exists, no culture can justifiably say that its morality is objectively superior.

On its face, this might strike us as problematic for a couple of reasons. Perhaps this principle of normative relativism *itself* is only specific to our culture and does not necessarily apply to all cultures. In other words, just because my culture accepts normative relativism this does not entail that all cultures must abide by the same principle (of normative relativism) and not consider their moralities superior. However, if the normative relativist insists that this principle is true for all cultures (that no culture should judge the moralities of other cultures or consider its morality superior), then this seems like an admission of a universal value that is true across all cultures irrespective of whether or not they believe it to be true. Remember that one of the reasons for which relativists deny moral objectivity is the implausibility of the existence of universal values and moral facts that we can come to know. And yet, if the normative relativist believes that no culture should criticize the morality of another culture (and that this principle holds true for all

cultures), then this is exactly the kind of universal moral fact that the relativist denies.

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## **Common Objections to Moral**

## **Relativism**

### **What or Who Is the Moral Standard Relative To?**

One of the difficulties with moral relativism in general is answering the question of what a culture is or what counts as an appropriate body of people for morality to be relative to or dependent on. Is a village a large enough population to have its own valid ethical code? Or is morality only relative to national governments and the laws set by them? Perhaps moral subjectivism is the correct form of relativism, and morality comes down to the judgments of individuals, with each individual

subject being enough to form a moral community with an ethical code.

This is a serious problem for relativism because the concept of a culture is so vague and ill-defined that it becomes almost useless for ethical discussions. Consider the example of the early, abolitionist movement in the United States prior to the abolishment of slavery:

- Was it wrong for a group of people in America to hold anti-slavery views given that the majority of the country was pro-slavery and the laws reflected such beliefs?
- Is it wrong for minority groups in other nations to hold views contrary to popular opinion and written law?

If meta-ethical relativism is true, then a moral claim is true if it accords with the moral view of the culture and false if it is not. This would mean that the abolitionists held a false moral view because it diverged from the view of the wider culture.

Perhaps the relativist can respond that the abolitionist movement was large enough to count as a culture and is therefore a legitimate moral

position, even though it differed from the majority view in that country. But this merely pushes the question back one step further: If the abolitionists numbered only one hundred members, would this be enough to comprise a culture? What if there were only twenty? Where if there were only two? One? On what basis does the relativist define “culture” to make it significant for ethical discussion?

## That Is Absurd!

The most common responses to relativism come in the form of what is called a **reductio ad absurdum** — a form of argument meant to disprove a view by showing us the difficult or absurd (hence the name) conclusions that the view being responded to would lead to. If the consequences are sufficiently counterintuitive or ridiculous, then we are justified in rejecting the view as being false. For example, if someone argued that every person ought to be a full-time physician you could respond that if everyone were a full-time physician, then there would be no full-

time politicians, firefighters, police officers, teachers, humanitarian workers, builders, artists, etc. We cannot have a functioning society if that person's position were true. We need more than just full-time physicians to have a coherent society. Thus, their position leads to absurd consequences and is certainly false! This next section will first look at three major problems that relativism faces.

If relativism is true, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some obviously wrong behaviours are actually morally acceptable simply because some cultures practice them. Most people today think that it is really morally wrong to burn widows on funeral pyres, even though it was practiced by a large group of people at one point. The relativist's position, however, commits them to conceding that even controversial practices — such as suttee, female genital mutilation, infanticide, and slavery — are morally acceptable to the cultures that do not see them as immoral. And because the relativist denies that some objective morals or values hold universally, then there is no independent standard by which to evaluate behaviours and ethical codes.

There is another problem along these lines that lay

at the heart of the moral relativist argument. That is, there is a deep contradiction in foundational claim of moral relativism: “there are no universal moral truths.” If relativism is true, and there is no objective standard to morality, then why should we take the relativists thoughts about morality seriously at all in the first place? In other words, is the statement made by the relativist that, “there are no objective moral truths,” itself an objective statement about morality? If the relativist replies that, “no, there is not,” then it would seem that the moral relativist has no persuasive force as to why we should accept their views about morality over any other theories about morality. But if the relativist answers, “yes, it is an objective statement about morality,” then the relativist must concede that there are some objective answers about the nature of morality. Either way, the relativist position is a self-defeating one.

Some relativists, like David Wong (2009), see the force of this problem and try to circumvent it by conceding that some moralities are superior because they better meet the needs of people that are consistent across all cultures. However, this attempt to rescue relativism seems to again undermine relativism itself! By acknowledging that

certain moralities are superior because they do a better job of helping humans flourish, the relativist has conceded that there exists at least one moral fact that is true, independent of culture or standpoint, namely that human flourishing and well-being are good, and we should aim to maximize them.

If the relativist thinks that this fact is true regardless of what anybody believes about it and if the cultures whose moralities better enable human flourishing and well-being are superior to the moralities or cultures that impede human flourishing and well-being, then this admission deflates the relativist position. Acknowledging that some moralities are objectively better than others presumes that there exists some independent standard or set of facts by which we can judge moralities and ethical codes. Once the admission of some independent condition(s) is entertained, then it seems that we are no longer thinking relativistically but objectively.

# No Room for Social Reform and Progress

One of the strongest objections to relativism is the idea that if relativism is true, then there can be no such thing as social reform or moral progress. If each culture's ethical code is equally good and right, then when a country changes its ethical code from being pro-slavery to being anti-slavery, this moral change is merely a change rather an improvement. Moral improvement and progress require that there be some standard toward which a society or an ethical code is approaching; they also entail that the subsequent morality is better than the prior morality, but again, this is not something that can be said if relativism is true.

When the United States abolished slavery and segregation and gave women and minorities the right to vote, its ethical code underwent a change. But to say that it underwent an improvement requires saying that enslaving African Americans, segregating white people from black people, and preventing women and minorities from voting are objectively worse, morally speaking, than their opposites. Relativism cannot consistently support

such a position, for relativism entails precisely the opposite, namely that morality has no objective standards and is relative to communities. If a community decides that it wants to endorse *x* and then later decides to morally condemn *x*, then both moralities are equal. No morality is superior to another.

However, this seems like another bullet to bite. Relativism implies that certain instances of obvious moral improvement are merely instances of moral change rather than moral progress. William Wilberforce's work to end the slave trade in the British Empire, Martin Luther King Jr.'s life — and eventual martyrdom — dedicated to advocating equality and eliminating racism, and the countless other moral exemplars who were able to see past culture, law, and accepted custom to recognize moral truths that get buried or obfuscated over time really did help bring about moral progress. To say otherwise seems strongly counterintuitive.

# Relativism and the Virtue of Tolerance

This last point ties in with another argument put forward in favor of relativism, namely that it promotes tolerance. Admirably, the relativist wants us to approach the subject of ethics with humility and not rush to condemn behaviours different from ours as immoral. The idea is that if we acknowledge that no one culture's ethical code is superior to another, then our ability to practice tolerance naturally increases, for all moralities are equal. Relativism, it is argued, makes moral superiority unjustified.

However noble this might seem, it faces the same problem we previously discussed: If all moralities are equal, then why should we think that tolerance is a universal value? If relativism is true, then no ethical codes are superior, so why should we think an ethical code that promotes tolerance is better than the ethical code that ignores tolerance? By arguing that we should prefer relativism on the grounds that it better helps us promote and justify tolerance, then the relativist has conceded the existence of at least one universal value that all

morality can be judged by, namely tolerance. The presence of this universal value — this objective fact about the way we ought to live and behave — undercuts relativism, itself, for it concedes that there is at least one value that is not relative.

Moreover, tolerance is often an appropriate reaction to interacting with positions, beliefs, and behaviours different from our own. But are some behaviours and moral viewpoints not worthy of tolerance? Surely it is appropriate to be intolerant of child abuse, indoctrination, slavery, senseless violence, oppression of the vulnerable, etc. While tolerance is obviously appropriate and even necessary in some situations, intolerance — and even indignation and moral outrage — are certainly appropriate and justified in the face of evil.

## Conclusion

Much of the relativism espoused by ordinary people admirably has its roots in the virtues of tolerance for opposing views and humility about

one's own positions, and in that respect, it can be applauded. However, this kind of relativism is often endorsed without the appropriate level of critical evaluation that inevitably shows the inconsistency, unlivability, and even the immoral consequences of relativism. Such consequences include:

- Moral progress is impossible.
- Certain obviously immoral behaviors like slavery and oppression of women and minorities are morally acceptable simply because they enjoy acceptance by a culture.

It is for these reasons, among others, that a 2009 survey found that only 27.7% of professional philosophers are anti-realists, with only a fraction of those endorsing relativism about ethics (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 34). Relativism clashes with much of what seems to be fundamental to the human experience. We cringe when we recall the atrocities of American slavery, the Holocaust, and the Rape of Nanking. We see the wrongness of these atrocities like we see the rightness of  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Relativism suffers from several major problems, and this should make us

question its ability to explain the nature of morality.

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## How to Cite This Page

Rezkalla, Paul. 2024. "Moral Relativism and Meta-Ethics." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/moral-relativism-and-meta-ethics/>

## Attribution

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# Maximizing Morality: The Utilitarian Ethic

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# Introduction

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Let us start our introduction to utilitarianism with an example that shows how utilitarians answer the following question, “Can the ends justify the means?”

Imagine that Peter is an unemployed poor man in New York. Although he has no money, his family still depends on him; his unemployed wife (Sandra) is sick and needs \$500 for treatment, and their little children (Ann and Sam) have been thrown out of school because they could not pay tuition fees (\$500 for both of them). Peter has no source of income, and he cannot get a loan; even John (his friend and a millionaire) has refused to help him. From his perspective, there are only two alternatives: either he pays by stealing or he does not. So, he steals \$1,000 from John in order to pay for Sandra’s treatment and to pay the tuition fees of Ann and Sam. One could say that stealing is morally wrong. Therefore, we will say that what Peter has done — stealing from John — is morally wrong.

Utilitarianism, however, will say what Peter has done is morally right. For utilitarians, stealing in itself is neither bad nor good; what makes it bad or good is the consequences it produces. In our example, Peter stole from one person who has less need for the money and spent the money on three people who have more need for the money. Therefore, for utilitarians, Peter's stealing from John (the "means") can be justified by the fact that the money was used for the treatment of Sandra and the tuition fees of Ann and Sam (the "end"). This justification is based on the calculation that the benefits of the theft outweigh the losses caused by the theft. Peter's act of stealing is morally right because it produces more good than bad. In other words, the action produced more pleasure or happiness than pain or unhappiness; that is, it increased net utility.

The aim of this chapter is to explain why utilitarianism reaches the conclusion described above and then examine the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism. The discussion is divided into three parts:

1. The first part explains what utilitarianism is.
2. The second discusses some varieties (or

- types) of utilitarianism.
3. The third explores whether utilitarianism is persuasive and reasonable.

## What is Utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism. For consequentialism, the moral rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the consequences it produces. On consequentialist grounds, actions and inactions whose negative consequences outweigh the positive consequences will be deemed morally wrong, while actions and inactions whose positive consequences outweigh the negative consequences will be deemed morally right. On utilitarian grounds, actions and inactions which benefit few people and harm more people will be deemed morally wrong, while actions and inactions which harm fewer people and benefit more people will be deemed morally right.



*Figure 14.1:*  
*John Stuart*  
*Mill. Public*  
*Domain*

Benefit and harm utilitarianism can be characterized in more than one way; for classical utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), they are defined in terms of

happiness/unhappiness and pleasure/pain. On this view, actions and inactions that cause less pain or unhappiness and more pleasure or happiness than available alternative actions and inactions will be deemed morally right, while actions and inactions that cause more pain or unhappiness and less pleasure or happiness than available alternative actions and inactions will be deemed morally wrong. Although pleasure and happiness can have different meanings, in the context of this chapter, they will be treated as synonymous.

Utilitarians' concern is how to increase net utility. Their moral theory is based on the principle of utility, which states that "the morally right action is the action that produces the most good" (Driver 2014). The morally wrong action is the one that

leads to the reduction of the maximum good. For instance, a utilitarian may argue that although some armed robbers robbed a bank in a heist, as long as there are more people who benefit from the robbery (say, in a Robin Hood-like manner, the robbers generously shared the money with many people) than there are people who suffer from the robbery (say, only the billionaire who owns the bank will bear the cost of the loss), the heist will be morally right rather than morally wrong. And on this utilitarian premise, if more people suffer from the heist while fewer people benefit from it, the heist will be morally wrong.

From the above description of utilitarianism, it is noticeable that utilitarianism is opposed to deontology, which is a moral theory that says that as moral agents, we have certain duties or obligations, and these duties or obligations are formalized in terms of rules (see Kantian Deontology). There is a variant of utilitarianism, namely rule utilitarianism, that provides rules for evaluating the utility of actions and inactions (see the next part of the chapter for a detailed explanation). The difference between a utilitarian rule and a deontological rule is that according to rule utilitarians, acting according to the rule is

correct because the rule is one that, if widely accepted and followed, will produce the most good. According to deontologists, whether the consequences of our actions are positive or negative does not determine their moral rightness or moral wrongness. What determines their moral rightness or moral wrongness is whether we act or fail to act in accordance with our duty or duties (where our duty is based on rules that are not themselves justified by the consequences of their being widely accepted and followed).

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## **Some Varieties (Or Types) of Utilitarianism**

The above description of utilitarianism is general. We can, however, distinguish between different types of utilitarianism. First, we can distinguish between “actual consequence utilitarians” and “foreseeable consequence utilitarians.” The former base the evaluation of the moral rightness and

moral wrongness of actions on the actual consequences of actions, while the latter base the evaluation of the moral rightness and moral wrongness of actions on the foreseeable consequences of actions. J. J. C. Smart (1920–2012) explains the rationale for this distinction with reference to the following example:

Imagine that you rescued someone from drowning. You were acting in good faith to save a drowning person, but it just so happens that the person later became a mass murderer. Since the person became a mass murderer, actual consequence utilitarians would argue that, in hindsight, the act of rescuing the person was morally wrong. However, foreseeable consequence utilitarians would argue that — looking forward (i.e., in foresight) — it could not be foreseen that the person was going to be a mass murderer, hence the act of rescuing them was morally right (Smart 1973, 49). Moreover, they could have turned out to be a “saint” or Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King Jr., in which case the action would be considered to be morally right by actual consequence utilitarians.

A second distinction we can make is that between

act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism focuses on individual actions and says that we should apply the principle of utility in order to evaluate them. Therefore, act utilitarians argue that among possible actions, the action that produces the most utility would be the morally right action. But this may seem impossible to do in practice, since, for everything that we might do that has a potential effect on other people, we would thus be morally required to examine its consequences and pick the one with the best outcome. Rule utilitarianism responds to this problem by focusing on general types of actions and determining whether they typically lead to good or bad results. For them, this is the meaning of commonly held moral rules: they are generalizations of the typical consequences of our actions. For example, if stealing typically leads to bad consequences, a rule utilitarian would consider stealing in general to be wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, rule utilitarians claim to be able to reinterpret talk of rights, justice, and fair treatment

1. <sup>2</sup>

2. [1]

in terms of the principle of utility by claiming that the rationale behind any such rules is really that these rules generally lead to greater welfare for all concerned. We may wonder whether utilitarianism in general is capable of even addressing the notion that people have rights and deserve to be treated justly and fairly because, in critical situations, the rights and well-being of persons can be sacrificed as long as this seems to lead to an increase in overall utility.

For example, in a version of the famous “trolley problem,” imagine that you and an overweight stranger are standing next to each other on a footbridge above a rail track. You discover that there is a runaway trolley rolling down the track and the trolley is about to kill five people who cannot get off of the track quickly enough to avoid the accident. Being willing to sacrifice yourself to save the five persons, you consider jumping off the bridge, in front of the trolley, but you realize that you are far too light to stop the trolley. The only way you can stop the trolley from killing five people



*Figure 14.2:  
Trams in  
Christchurch.  
Public Domain*

is by pushing this large stranger off the footbridge in front of the trolley. If you push the stranger off, he will be killed, but you will save the other five. (Singer 2005, 340)

Utilitarianism, especially act utilitarianism, seems to suggest that the life of the overweight stranger should be sacrificed regardless of any purported right to life he may have. A rule utilitarian, however, may respond that since, in general, killing innocent people to save others is not what typically leads to the best outcomes, we should be very wary of making a decision to do so in this case. This is especially true in this scenario since everything rests on our calculation of what might possibly stop the trolley, while in fact there is really far too much uncertainty in the outcome to warrant such a serious decision. If nothing else, the emphasis placed on general principles by rule utilitarians can serve as a warning not to take too lightly the notion that the ends might justify the means.

Whether or not this response is adequate is something that has been extensively debated with reference to this famous example as well as countless variations. This brings us to our final question here about utilitarianism — whether it is

ultimately a persuasive and reasonable approach to morality.

**Is**

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## **Utilitarianism Persuasive and Reasonable?**

First of all, let us start by asking about the principle of utility as the foundational principle of morality, that is, about the claim that what is morally right is just what leads to the better outcome. John Stuart Mill's argument is based on his claim that "each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness" (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 4). Mill derives the principle of utility from this claim based on three considerations: desirability, exhaustiveness, and impartiality. That is, happiness is desirable as an end in itself; it is the only thing that is so desirable (exhaustiveness); and no one person's happiness is really any more

desirable or less desirable than that of any other person (impartiality) (see Macleod 2017).

In defending desirability, Mill argues, “The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner...the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.” (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 4)

In defending exhaustiveness, Mill does not argue that other things, apart from happiness, are not desired as such. However, while other things *appear* to be desired, happiness is the only thing that is *really* desired since whatever else we may desire, we do so because attaining that thing would make us happy. Finally, in defending impartiality, Mill argues that equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether the happiness is felt by the same person or by different persons. In Mill’s words, “each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons” (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 4). We may wonder, however, whether this last argument is truly

adequate. Does Mill really show here that we should treat everyone's happiness as equally worthy of pursuit, or does he simply assert this?

Let us assume that Mill's argument here is successful and that the principle of utility is the basis of morality. In this case, utilitarianism claims that we should calculate, to the best of our ability, the expected utility that will result from our actions and how it will affect us and others and use that as the basis for the moral evaluation of our decisions. But then we may ask, how exactly do we quantify utility? Here, there are two different but related problems:

- How can we come up with a way of comparing different types of pleasure or pain and benefit or harm that we myself might experience?
- How can we compare one person's benefit and another's on some neutral scale of comparison?

Bentham famously claimed that there was a single universal scale that could enable us to objectively compare all benefits and harms based on the following factors: intensity, duration, certainty/

uncertainty, proximity, fecundity, purity, and extent. And he offered on this basis what he called a “felicific calculus” as a way of objectively comparing any two pleasures we might encounter (Bentham [1789] 1907).

For example, let us compare the pleasure of drinking a pint of beer to that of reading Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Suppose the following are the case:

- The pleasure derived from drinking a pint of beer is more intense than the pleasure derived from reading *Hamlet*. — **Intensity**
- The pleasure of drinking the beer lasts longer than that of reading *Hamlet*. — **Duration**
- We are confident that drinking the beer is more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet*. — **Certainty/Uncertainty**
- The beer is closer to us than the play, and therefore, it is easier for us to access the former than the latter. — **Proximity**
- Drinking the beer is more likely to promote more pleasure in the future, while reading *Hamlet* is less likely to promote more pleasure in the future. — **Fecundity**
- Drinking the beer is pure pleasure, while

reading *Hamlet* is mixed with something else.

— **Purity**

- Finally, drinking the beer affects both myself and my friends in the bar and so has a greater extent than my solitary reading of *Hamlet*. —

**Extent**

Since, on all of these measures, drinking a pint of beer is more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet*, according to Bentham, it follows that it is objectively better for you to drink the pint of beer and forget about reading *Hamlet*, and so you should. Of course, it is up to each individual to make such a calculation based on the intensity, duration, certainty, etc. of the pleasure resulting from each possible choice they may make in their eyes, but Bentham at least claims that such a comparison is possible.

This brings us back to the problem we mentioned before that, realistically, we cannot be expected to always engage in very difficult calculations every single time we want to make a decision. In an attempt to resolve this problem, utilitarians might claim that in evaluating the moral rightness and moral wrongness of actions, applying the principle of utility can be backward-looking (based on

hindsight) or forward-looking (based on foresight). That is, we can use past experience of the results of our actions as a guide to estimating what the probable outcomes of our actions might be and save ourselves from the burden of having to make new estimates for each and every choice we may face.

In addition, we may wonder whether Bentham's approach misses something important about the different kinds of pleasurable outcomes we may pursue. Mill, for example, would respond to our claim that drinking beer is objectively more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet* by saying that it overlooks an important distinction between qualitatively different kinds of pleasure. In Mill's view, Bentham's calculus misses the fact that not all pleasures are equal — there are "higher" and "lower" pleasures that make it "better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 2). Mill justifies this claim by saying that between two pleasures — although one pleasure requires a greater amount of difficulty to attain than the other pleasure — if those who are competently acquainted with both pleasures prefer (or value) one over the other, then

one is a higher pleasure while the other is a lower pleasure.

For Mill, although drinking a pint of beer may seem to be more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet*, if you are presented with these two options and you are to make a choice — each and every time or as a rule — you should still choose to read *Hamlet* and forego drinking the pint of beer. Reading *Hamlet* generates a higher quality (although perhaps a lower quantity) of pleasure, while drinking a pint of beer generates lower quality (although higher quantity) of pleasure.

In the end, these issues may be merely technical problems faced by utilitarianism — is there some neutral scale of comparison between pleasures? If there is, is it based on Bentham's scale, which makes no distinctions between higher and lower pleasures, or Mill's, which does? However, the more serious problem, remains, which is that utilitarianism seems willing in principle to sacrifice the interests and even perhaps lives of individuals for the sake of the benefit of a larger group. And this seems to conflict with our basic moral intuition that people have a *right* not to be used in this way. While Mill argued that the notion of rights could be

accounted for on purely utilitarian terms, Bentham simply dismissed it. For him such “natural rights” are “simple nonsense, natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense—nonsense upon stilts” (Bentham [1796] 1843, 501).

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## Conclusion

Let us conclude by revisiting the question we started with: can the ends justify the means? We stated that, as far as utilitarianism is concerned, the answer to this question is in the affirmative. While the answer is plausible and right for utilitarians, it is implausible for many others and notably wrong for deontologists. As we have seen in this chapter, on a close examination, utilitarianism is less persuasive and less reasonable than it appears to be when far away.

- 
1. Of course, there may be exceptions to such a rule in particular, atypical cases if stealing

might lead to better consequences. This raises a complication for rule utilitarians: if they were to argue that we should follow rules such as “do not steal” except in those cases where stealing would lead to better consequences, then this could mean rule utilitarianism wouldn’t be very different from act utilitarianism. One would still have to evaluate the consequences of each particular act to see if one should follow the rule or not. Hooker (2016) argues that rule utilitarianism need not collapse into act utilitarianism in this way, because it would be better to have a set of rules that are more clear and easily understood and followed than ones that require us to evaluate many possible exceptions. ↵

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## How to Cite This Page

Abumere, Frank A. 2024. "Maximizing Morality: The Utilitarian Ethic" In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/maximizing-morality-the-utilitarian-ethic/>.

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# Kantian Deontology

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## Introduction

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Relative to most other philosophers, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a late bloomer, publishing his first significant work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, in 1781 at age 57. But this did not slow him down, as through his 50s, 60s, and 70s, he published numerous large and influential works in many areas of philosophy, including ethics. He published two large works on ethics — *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Metaphysics of Morals* — but it is his first short work of ethics — *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* — that is his most important because it provides a succinct and relatively readable account of his ethics.

Some of the main questions that Kant's ethics focuses on are questions of right and wrong:

- What makes an action right or wrong?
- Which actions are we required by morality to perform?
- Do consequences matter?
- Is it ever permissible to do something morally wrong in order to achieve good consequences?
- Is it important to do actions with good intentions? And what are good intentions?

Some of Kant's answers to some of these questions are complex, but as we will see, he does not think that consequences matter, and thus, good consequences cannot justify wrong actions. He also thinks that intentions are important to the ethical evaluation of actions.

## Deontology

One of the distinctive features of Kant's ethics is that it focuses on duties, defined by right and

wrong. Right and wrong (which are the primary deontic categories, along with obligatory, optional, supererogatory, and others) are distinct from good and bad (which are value categories) in that they directly prescribe actions: right actions are ones we ought to do (are morally required to do) and wrong actions we ought not to do (are morally forbidden from doing). This style of ethics is referred to as deontology. The name comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty or obligation. In deontology, the deontic categories are primary, while value determinations are derived from them. As we will see, Kant believes all our duties can be derived from the categorical imperative. We will first need to explain what Kant means by the phrase “categorical imperative,” and then we will look at the content of this rule.

First, Kant believes that morality must be rational. He models his morality on science, which seeks to discover universal laws that govern the natural world. Similarly, morality will be a system of universal rules that govern action. In Kant’s view, as we will see, right action is ultimately a rational action. As an ethics of duty, Kant believes that ethics consist of commands about what we ought to do. The word “imperative” in his categorical

imperative means a command or order. However, unlike most other commands, which usually come from some authority, these commands come from within, from our own reason. Still, they function the same way: they are commands to do certain actions.

Kant distinguishes two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative is a contingent command. It is conditional on a person's wants, needs, or desires and normally comes in the following form: "If you want/need A, then you ought to do B." For example, the advice "If you want to do well on a test, then you should study a lot" would be a hypothetical imperative. The command that you study is contingent on your desire to do well on the test. Other examples are, "If you are thirsty, drink water," or "If you want to be in better shape, you should exercise." Such commands are more like advice on how to accomplish our goals than moral rules. If you do not have a particular want, desire, or goal, then a hypothetical imperative does not apply. For example, if you do not want to be in better shape, then the hypothetical imperative that you should exercise, does not apply to you.

A genuinely moral imperative would not be contingent on wants, desires, or needs, and this is what is meant by a categorical imperative. A categorical imperative, instead of taking an if-then form, is an absolute command, such as “Do A” or “You ought to do A.” Examples of categorical imperatives would be “You should not kill,” “You ought to help those in need,” or “Do not steal.” It does not matter what your wants or goals are; you should follow a categorical imperative no matter what.

But these are not *the* categorical imperative. Kant believes that there is one categorical imperative that is the most important and that should guide all of our actions. This is the ultimate categorical imperative from which all other moral rules are derived. This categorical imperative can be expressed in several different ways, and Kant presents three formulations of it in *The Groundwork*.

# The First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

The underlying idea behind the first formulation of the categorical imperative is that moral rules are supposed to be universal laws. If we think of comparable laws — such as scientific laws, like the law of gravitational attraction or Newton’s three laws of motion — they are universal and apply to all people equally, no matter who they are or what their needs are. If our moral rules are to be rational, then they should have the same form.

From this idea, Kant derives his first formulation of the categorical imperative: **“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”** (*Groundwork* 4:421).<sup>1</sup>

First, we must explain the word “maxim.” What Kant means by a maxim is a personal rule or a

1. <sup>2</sup>

2. [1]

general principle that underlies a particular action. As rational beings, we do not just act randomly; we devise certain rules that tell us what to do in different circumstances.

A complete maxim will include three pieces:

1. The action
2. The circumstances under which we do that action
3. The purpose behind that action

For example, consider the maxim explaining why you are reading this book. If it is an assigned text, it might be, "I will read all books assigned for class because I want to succeed in class." Different principles could underlie the same action. For example, you might be reading this book simply to help you understand the topic, in which case your principle might be, "When I am confused about a topic, I will read an accessible text to improve my understanding." The important point is that we are guided by general principles that we give to ourselves, which tell us what we will do in certain circumstances.

Thus, the first formulation is a test of whether any

particular maxim should be followed or not. We test a maxim by universalizing it; that is, by asking if it would be possible for everyone to live by this maxim. If the maxim can be universalized, meaning that it is possible that everyone could live by it, then it is permissible to follow it. If it cannot be universalized, then it is impermissible to follow it. The logic of the universalization test is that any rule you follow should apply to everyone — there is nothing special about you that allows you to be an exception.

To look at some examples, imagine you need money to pay off some debts. You go to a friend to borrow the money and tell this friend that you will pay him back. You know you will not be able to pay your friend back, but you promise him nonetheless. You are making a false promise. Is this permissible? To test, we first look at the maxim underlying the action, something like, “If I need something, I will make a false promise in order to get what I need.” What would happen if everyone were to make false promises every time they needed something? False promises would be rampant, so rampant that promises would become meaningless; they would just be empty words. For this reason, the maxim cannot be universalized.

The maxim included the idea of making a promise, but if, when universalized, promises cease to have any meaning, then we could not really make a promise. Since the maxim cannot be universalized, we should not follow it, and thus, we derive the duty to not make false promises.

We should note that Kant's universalization test is not asking whether universalizing a maxim would lead to undesirable consequences. Kant is not claiming that making a false promise is wrong because we would not want to live in a world where no one kept their promises. It is wrong because it is not possible to universalize the maxim. It is not possible because it leads to a contradiction. In this case, the contradiction is in the concept of a promise: that it becomes meaningless when universalized.

We can see this with other maxims. If you are thinking of stealing something, the maxim underlying this action might be something like, "I will steal the things I want so I can have what I want." If everyone were to follow this maxim, then the concept of ownership would cease to have any meaning, and if nothing were owned, then how would it be possible to steal? To steal means to

take someone else's property without permission, and this is where the contradiction comes in. It is not possible to steal if nothing belongs to anyone. Thus, it is not possible to universalize this maxim, and we thereby get the duty that we should not steal. Both of these contradictions are what Kant calls "contradictions in conception."

Another example Kant gives is of our obligation to help out others. Suppose you could help people but did not want to. Your maxim might be, "I will never help out anyone else since everyone should be independent." If this were universalized, then everyone would be completely independent, with no one asking for nor offering help. However, we would not be able to live in a world where no one helps anyone because we will inevitably sometimes need others' help. The contradiction in this case is a practical contradiction, "a contradiction in will," as Kant calls it. In this case, we would eventually have to break the maxim due to our need for help. Thus, from this, we get the duty that we should sometimes help out others in need.

# Problems With the First Formulation

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One criticism that Kant faced among his contemporaries was for his stance on lying, since he said that we always have a duty to be truthful to others (*Metaphysics of Morals* 8:426). His reasoning seems to be that if we were to try to universalize a maxim that permits lying, such as “I will lie whenever it’s convenient to get what I want,” then people would be lying constantly, and it would lead to the concepts of “lie” and “truth” becoming meaningless. Thus, since “lie” would no longer mean anything, it is impossible to universalize this maxim, and thus, we should never lie. His contemporaries thought there must be cases where lying is permissible, and Kant responded in his essay “On a Supposed Right to Lie From Philanthropy.” In this essay, Kant imagined a situation that would seem to permit lying. Suppose that your friend is being pursued by someone who intends to kill him. Your friend comes to your house and asks to hide. You let him do so, and

soon after, the killer is knocking at your door asking, “Is your friend inside?” Should you lie or not?

Kant asserts that you should not lie, even in these circumstances. Suppose your friend hears the killer knocking at the door and decides to flee out the back without your knowing. You lie and tell the killer that your friend is not here, and the killer leaves. Because of this, your friend and the killer bump into each other, and your friend is killed. Since your lie led them to bump into each other, you bear some responsibility for your friend’s death.

His general point is that consequences are uncertain. Importantly, Kant believes that consequences do not affect whether an action is right or wrong, and this example highlights why: because consequences are unpredictable. The type of rational approach to ethics that Kant prefers downplays the importance of consequences due to this unpredictability.

Another problem for the first formulation is that it is possible to imagine maxims that cannot be universalized but that do not seem to be immoral.

For example, a stamp collector might live by the maxim, “I will buy but not sell stamps in order to expand my collection.” If everyone were to follow this, then the collector would not be able to buy because no one would be selling. This seems to lead to the implausible conclusion that collecting stamps (or collecting anything) is immoral.

Since Kant says that we are to “act only in accordance” with maxims that can be universalized, then any maxim that cannot be universalized is impermissible.

Some who want to defend Kant think that the problem is with how this maxim is phrased. The maxim specifies two actions: buying and not selling. If we split it into two maxims — “I will buy stamps to expand my collection” and “I will not sell stamps to expand my collection” — the problem can be avoided. This does point to a general difficulty with the first formulation, generally referred to as the “problem of relevant descriptions,” which is that there is often more than one way to describe the maxim underlying an action. And when we formulate it some ways (like in this case with the stamp collecting) it leads to

a contradiction, whereas formulating it other ways does not.

## Good Will

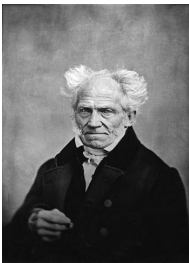
For Kant, just doing the right thing is not sufficient for making an action have full moral worth. It is also necessary to act with good will, by which Kant means something like the inclination to do good or what is also known as a good character. He believes that a good will is essential for morality. This is intuitively plausible because it seems that if an otherwise good action is done with bad or selfish intentions, that can rob the action of its moral goodness. If we imagine a man who goes to work at a soup kitchen to help out the poor, that seems like a good action. But if he is going there just to impress someone who works there, then that is less virtuous. And if he is going there to embezzle money from the charity, the action would be morally wrong.

Less intuitive is that Kant thinks the only possible genuine good will is respect for the moral law.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) would later describe Kant’s position as :

a deed must be performed simply and solely out of regard for the known law and for the concept of duty.... It must not be performed from any inclination, any benevolence felt towards others, any tender-hearted sympathy, compassion, or emotion of the heart.” ([1818] 1969, 526)

That is, when you do something because it is the right thing to do, that alone counts as good will.



*Figure 15.1:*  
*Arthur*  
*Schopenhauer.*  
*Public Domain*

Schopenhauer was a critic of Kant’s philosophy, including his ethics, and he objected that Kant’s view of the good will is “directly opposed to the genuine spirit of virtue; not the deed, but the willingness to

do it, the love from which it results, and without which it is a dead work, this constitutes its meritorious element” ([1818] 1969, 526).

Schopenhauer thought that good people are good because they want to do good actions and feel love and compassion towards others. If we return to the example of working in the soup kitchen, if the person is showing up to the soup kitchen because he likes helping people or feels compassion for the people he helps and wants to improve their lot, Schopenhauer would say this is a good person and, thus, a virtuous action.

Kant defended his position on good will by saying that an action done out of love or compassion is not fully autonomous. Autonomy means self-rule, and Kant saw it as a necessary condition for freedom and morality. If an action is not done autonomously, it is not really morally good or bad. Again, if our friend at the soup kitchen is working there because of some implant in his brain by which another person is able to control his every action, then the action is neither autonomous nor morally commendable.

Concerning acting out of love and compassion, Kant believed that when people act due to their emotions, then their emotions are in control not their rationality. To be truly autonomous, for Kant, an action must be done because of reason. An

action done because of emotion is not fully free and not quite fully moral. This does not mean you should not enjoy doing good things. It just means that this should not be the reason underlying the action. According to Kant's ethics, it is morally commendable for a person, acting out of good will, to decide that helping at the soup kitchen is the right thing to do, to go there, and then to thoroughly enjoy doing so and feel great compassion for the people helped. The important point is that reason you do an action should be because you have determined that it is the right thing to do.

## **The Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative**



The idea underlying the second formulation is that all humans are intrinsically valuable. As Kant writes, "What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other

hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity" (*Groundwork* 4:434). What has a price is a thing, but a person has dignity and is, thus, beyond price and irreplaceable. It follows that a person with dignity deserves respect and should not be treated as a thing.

Kant expresses this idea in the second formulation of his categorical imperative: **"So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means"** (*Groundwork* 4:429).

That is, we should not treat people merely as means to ends; we should treat them as ends, including ourselves. To treat someone merely as a means does not give the person the proper respect — to fail to treat the person with dignity and, instead, treat them as a thing. It makes sense to use inanimate objects as tools — you can use a hammer as a means to drive in nails without worrying about how the hammer feels about this because it is a thing. But if you use a person in such a way, it devalues the person. Similarly, if you harm, take advantage of, or steal from someone, then you treat that person as a thing, as a means to

your ends. Conversely, if you treat someone with respect, dignity, and as having unlimited value, then you treat the person as an end.

One important thing to add is that Kant says we should never treat people “merely as a means.” The “merely” is there to acknowledge that we can treat people as means, so long as we do not only treat them as means. It is not unusual to have to use other people for their skills or knowledge, so it is necessary to sometimes treat people as means. For example, imagine that your pipes need fixing, and you call a plumber. You are using the plumber as a means because he is making your end (to fix your pipes) his end, but there is nothing wrong with this if you also treat him as an end — that is, if you are respectful and pay him appropriately. The plumber’s end is to make a living with his plumbing skills. By paying him the agreed-upon amount, you are making his end (earning a living) your end. Thus, in this situation, you both are effectively advancing each others’ ends at the same time and, thus, treating each other both as ends and means.

One way to think of the idea of treating someone as ends and means is that, when you treat people as ends, you make their ends your ends, and when

you treat people as means, you force them to make their ends your ends. To explain, let us look at an example from the first formulation. Since the first formulation and the second formulation of the categorical imperative are supposed to be saying the same thing, they should come to exactly the same conclusions about what is right and wrong. Thus, since we discovered earlier that it is wrong to make a false promise, then the second formulation should also tell us that false promises are wrong.

In our example, you made the false promise because you needed to borrow money to pay off debts; thus, your end was to pay off debts, and by lying to your friend, you are forcing him to make your end (paying off debts) his end. If you told your friend that you needed money and might not be able to pay it back, your friend would be able to decide. He might decide to make your end his end (to pay off your debts for you), but by depriving him of that choice, you are treating him as an object. For similar reasons, we can also conclude that any time we deceive someone, we are treating the person as a mere means to our ends.

We can also look at the other example from the first formulation discussed above and see that it

leads to the same conclusion. Kant argued that we have an obligation to sometimes help out others in need. To help people out is to make their ends our ends. For example, if you see that someone is poor and hungry, his end at that point might be to get food. If you give him food or money to buy food, you are making it your end to feed him. Since you should treat people as ends, then that means you should sometimes provide people with help.

In addition, the second formulation also includes the idea that we should not treat ourselves as a mere means to ends. In the *Groundwork*, Kant gives two examples of duties to oneself:

1. We should not commit suicide.
2. We should cultivate some of our useful talents.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant presents several more, including that you should not pursue greedy avarice, stupefy yourself with excessive food or drink, nor be excessively servile.

## On the Morality of Suicide

The question of the morality of suicide was a heated topic of debate in the Western intellectual tradition in Kant's day. Though we nowadays tend to think of suicide as a mental health issue and, thus, as a medical concern, it used to be much more often considered a moral concern. Suicide was a punishable crime in England until 1961, and both attempted and successful suicide could lead to serious penalties, with similar laws in many other countries.

The immorality of suicide was espoused by several influential Christian thinkers:

- **Augustine**, in his *City of God* (Book I, ch. 20), declared that the

commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” included suicide.

- **Thomas Aquinas**, in his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, Q. 64, A. 5), argued that (1) since our natural inclination is to try to stay alive and extend our life as long as possible, suicide is unnatural and therefore wrong, that (2) since our community benefits from our continued existence, then suicide harms the community, and that (3) since our life is not our own, being a gift from God, then committing suicide is a crime against God. Thus, suicide harms the self, society, and God.
- **Dante**, in his *Inferno* (Canto XIII), placed those who had committed suicide in the Second Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell, for those who commit violence against the self ([1320] 1995).

Such arguments were influential in Kant's day. His own arguments in the *Groundwork* are that (1) since suicide is motivated by self-interestedness (by a desire to end the sorrows a person is experiencing) and since self-interestedness normally impels us to try to improve our life, then suicide is self-contradictory and thus wrong (4:422) and that (2) by committing suicide one is treating oneself merely as a means and not as an end (4:429). Also, in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that suicide effectively harms the morality in the world by destroying one's capacity for morality within oneself (6:423).

There were other authors who disagreed:

- Much earlier, in *Utopia*, **Thomas More** argued that suicide should be permitted in cases when people suffer from unpleasant and incurable diseases ([1516] 2012).

- **Arthur Schopenhauer** took the view in *On Suicide* that suicide, though not a sensible choice in most cases, cannot be considered morally wrong because your life and person are the things that most clearly belong to you ([1851] 2015). Thus, you can dispose of them how you wish.
- **David Hume**, in his essay *Of Suicide*, published posthumously, targeted Aquinas's arguments that suicide harms self, society, and God: (1) Sometimes suicide does not harm the self, since in some cases, continuing to live is worse than death. (2) Suicide does not harm society because, by depriving society of oneself, one is merely withdrawing benefit, not harming society (and if one is actually a burden on society, then one does society great benefit). And (3) one's

life must be one's own, otherwise it would not make sense to praise people for risking their life for others ([1777] 1998).

Such a list of duties does raise the question, though, of what it means to treat oneself as a mere means. The idea that we could treat ourselves as a mere means seems somewhat implausible, and if we look at it the way we explained it before (to treat people as a mere means is to force them to make their ends our ends), then it does not make sense. Our ends are our ends and cannot be anything other than our ends.

Perhaps, by treating oneself as a mere means, one is not treating oneself with respect — as a person with dignity and unlimited value. We can see how this might apply to duties like not being too servile or too avaricious. By being excessively servile, you are debasing yourself, making yourself into a thing to be used by someone else. And with excessive

greed, you are elevating the value of money over and above your own value.

Another way to think about it is that, by treating oneself as a mere means, one is not giving proper respect to the humanity within oneself. The second formulation specifically forbids treating the humanity in ourselves and others as a mere means. Concerning our humanity, Kant means mostly our capacity for rational human thought. So, by treating oneself as a mere means, one is not giving proper value to this rational capacity. One can see this in the case of stupefying oneself with excessive drink. Excessive drunkenness and opium use — the two examples Kant specifically mentions in the *Metaphysics of Morals* — dull one's thinking, and Kant describes them as turning a person into an animal, though he seems to concede that some level of moderate alcohol consumption or opium use might be permissible (6:427–6:428). Similarly, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, his argument against suicide is that, "To annihilate the subject of morality in one's own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world" (6:423). That is, by committing suicide, you destroy some of the morality in the world by destroying your capacity for morality.

## Kant on Animal Rights

Kant defines what counts as a person in terms of their capacity for rationality. This means that any being not capable of rationality lacks dignity, and thus we do not have the same moral obligation to not treat them as a mere means. One of the significant implications for this is how it affects our duties to non-human animals. Kant's ideas would imply that we can treat such animals however we wish. In terms of animal rights, whether animals have any rights (for example, the right not to be mistreated, harmed, or killed), Kant would say that since they are not rational, they have no rights.

Kant does argue that it is wrong to treat

animals cruelly. This duty is derived from a person's duty to himself. As Kant writes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: "With regard to the animate but non-rational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feelings of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other people" (6:443). That is, he is saying that mistreating animals will dull one's compassion towards other living beings and, thus, make one a less virtuous person.

He is clear that "the human being is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain)," which indicates that killing animals for food, or even hunting them for sport, is permissible, so long as it is done humanely. However, he does partially

disapprove of using animals for medical experiments: “agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could be achieved without these, are to be abhorred.” This passage was probably directed at the then-common practice of animal vivisection, but his words would suggest that animal experiments for medical purposes, in cases when the goal is to save human lives, might perhaps be permissible. Though we should emphasize that this duty to not mistreat animals is only because of the harm one might do to oneself by this cruelty to animals: “it is always only a duty of the human being to himself” (6:443).

# Problems With the Second Formulation

One of the main problems with the second formulation of the categorical imperative is that it is somewhat vague. There are clear-cut cases of using people as a mere means, such as slaveholders exploiting their slaves, but what about something more ambiguous, like an employer underpaying his employees? The employer is advancing the employees' ends by paying them, but clearly would better promote their ends if wages were raised. But what exactly counts as "underpaying" is unavoidably vague, and the categorical imperative does not give clear guidance.

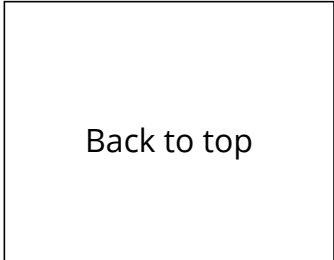
Another problem is that it does not seem that morality is entirely about not treating people as a mere means to ends. The categorical imperative is supposed to be the sole principle of morality. Thus, we should be able to derive *all* moral duties from it. But it seems like there are actions that are morally wrong but which do not amount to treating anyone as a mere means. For example, the destruction of the natural world through carelessness or

negligence seems wrong. If I accidentally start a forest fire by setting off fireworks when there is high fire risk, am I not morally culpable? But in what way have I treated a person merely as a means? The forest is not rational and, thus, is not an object of direct moral consideration. Kant does write, "A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature is opposed to a human being's duty to himself" (6:443). But if it is through neglect, it does not appear to be treating any person merely as means. Similarly, what about our obligation to care for the dead? If my mother wanted to be given a Christian burial, and instead, I simply left her body out in the woods, that would seem to be quite immoral. But how would we explain that in terms of treating her as a mere means? The body is no longer a person; it lacks humanity and rationality and, thus, is a thing, and it is permissible for us to treat things as a means. There are perhaps ways a defender of Kant could explain why these are wrong within a Kantian framework, but it is a potential limitation of the theory.

Kant is only able to derive obligations to not mistreat physical objects and non-rational living things from obligations to oneself and other

rational beings. By misusing objects and animals, we habituate ourselves to not giving others the proper respect, which thereby debases our character. But it does seem strange to say that the reason why it is wrong to damage non-human life is because it is harmful to oneself.

## The Third Formulation of the Categorical Imperative



Kant gives a third formulation of the categorical imperative based on the notion of a kingdom of ends. By kingdom, Kant explains, “I understand a systematic union of various rational beings through common laws” (*Groundwork* 4:433). By a kingdom of ends, we are to imagine an interconnected world of rational beings where everyone is treated as an end, treats everyone else as ends, and shares the same set of laws.

Kant explains the third formulation as, **“act in**

**accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends”** (*Groundwork* 4:439).

As mentioned, Kant believes that autonomy is necessary for morality. Here, Kant is emphasizing that we are each the creators of our own moral rules. We are fully autonomous beings, and if our morals were imposed on us, then that would undermine our autonomy; we would no longer fully decide our actions. To maintain full autonomy, everyone must be the creator of their own moral rules.

However, if everyone is creating their own moral rules, then would people not disagree on what is right and wrong? Kant does not believe so. He believes that the categorical imperative is the only rational moral rule and that we can derive a complete, consistent set of moral duties from the categorical imperative. Thus, every person who is fully following their rationality will agree on what is right and wrong.

# Conclusion

Despite many of the criticisms to which Kant's ethics has been subject, it remains one of the most influential ethical theories in contemporary Western ethics. Many thinkers agree with its emphasis on ethics being fundamentally rational and justifiable through reason. The first and second formulations of the categorical imperative also have great intuitive appeal. Despite the abstract way that the first formulation is expressed, its core meaning is that ethical rules should be universal and that if any rule cannot be universalized, it should not be followed. This appeals to our sense that all people deserve equal moral consideration and that we should not make special exceptions for ourselves or others. And the second formulation speaks to the idea that we are beings with intrinsic value and dignity and that to use people as if they are objects or tools is deeply immoral. Kant has put these intuitions into a sophisticated and carefully thought out framework that remains, to this day, a very useful way of thinking about difficult moral questions.

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1. There are many different editions and translations of Kant's works, and it is common practice in the philosophical community to use a standard referencing system that is the same across all of these rather than using page numbers (which differ across the various editions). The standard system, used in this chapter as well, refers to the German Royal Academy of Sciences edition of Kant's works, Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*. Most editions of Kant's texts will have the Academy reference numbers in them to make it easy to find quotes and arguments across editions. ↵

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## How to Cite This Page


Kranak, Joseph. 2024. "Kantian Deontology" In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/kantian-deontology/>.

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# On Virtue Ethics

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# Introduction

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This chapter explores a variety of approaches to the question of moral virtue and what it means to be a good person. It examines four ethical systems that revolve around the concept of virtue:

1. Aristotle's virtue ethics
2. Aquinas's Christian version of Aristotelian virtue ethics
3. Buddhist virtue ethics
4. Daoist and Confucian virtue ethics

Each will be presented as a different way of understanding what it might mean to live as a good person. For Aristotle, this is to be understood in terms of striving for the mean between extremes in the context of a well-ordered political community. For Aquinas, it is to be understood within the context of Christianity and natural law. For Buddhism, virtue is understood in terms of a life oriented toward the eightfold path that leads to the end of suffering. For Chinese philosophy,

both Daoist and Confucian, virtue means being in harmony with the Cosmic Dao.


## **What is Virtue Ethics?**

In philosophies of virtue ethics, rather than an emphasis on following rules, the emphasis is on developing oneself as a good person. It is not that following rules is not important; it is more the sense that being ethical means more than simply following the rules. For example, given an opportunity to donate to a charity, deontologists would consider whether there is an ethical rule that required them to donate. Utilitarians would consider whether a donation would produce better consequences if they donated than if they did not. Virtue ethicists would consider whether donating is the kind of action that a virtuous person would do. Another example would be deciding whether to lie or tell the truth. Rather than focus on rules or consequences, virtue ethicists ask what kind of person do they want to be: honest or dishonest?

Virtue ethicists place more importance on being a person who is honest, trustworthy, generous and other virtues that lead to a good life and place less importance on one's ethical duty or obligations. A common theme among virtue ethicists is stressing the importance of cultivating ethical values in order to increase human happiness. Businesses today increasingly incorporate virtue ethics in their work culture, often having a "statement of values" guiding their operations.

Because the right ethical action depends on the particularities of individual people and their particular situations, virtue ethics links goodness with wisdom because virtue is knowing *how* to make ethical decisions rather than knowing a list of general ethical rules that will not apply to every circumstance. Virtue ethicists tend to reject the view that ethical theory should provide a set of commands that dictate what we should do on all occasions. Instead, virtue ethicists advocate the cultivation of wisdom and character that people can use to internalize basic ethical principles from which they can determine the ethical course of action in particular situations. Virtue ethicists tend to see ethical principles as being inherent in the world and discoverable by means of rational

reflection and disciplined living. The different forms of virtue ethics may or may not focus on God as the ultimate source of ethical principles. What unites the various forms of virtue ethics is the focus on moral education to cultivate moral wisdom, discernment, and character in the belief that ethical virtue will manifest in ethical actions.



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# Aristotle on Excellence and Flourishing



*Figure 16.1: Aristotle. Public Domain*

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) believed that to understand something we need to understand its nature and proper function. He also believed that everything has an end, or goal, toward which it naturally moves. For example, a seed grows into a tree because the

purpose and function of the seed is to grow into a tree. Objects fulfill their purpose, not out of conscious desire, but because it is in their nature to fulfill their functions. Aristotle believed that our purpose is to pursue our proper human end, *eudaimonia*, which is best understood as human flourishing or living well. *Eudaimonia* is not momentary pleasure but enduring contentment — not just a good day but a good life. Aristotle said

that one swallow does not make a summer, and so, too, one day does not make one blessed and happy. It is human nature to move toward *eudaimonia*, and this is the purpose, function, or final goal (*telos*) of all human activity. We work to make money and a home, and we sacrifice to improve our future — all with the ultimate aim of living well.

Human flourishing means acting in ways that cause your essential human nature to achieve its most excellent form of expression. Aristotle held that a good life of lasting contentment can be gained only by a life of virtue — a life lived with both *phrónesis*, or “practical wisdom,” and *aretē*, or “excellence.” Aristotle defines human good as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that:

we take the characteristic activity of a human being to be a certain kind of life; and if we take this kind of life to be activity of the soul and actions in accordance with reason, and the characteristic activity of the good person to be to carry this out well and nobly, and a characteristic activity to be accomplished well when it is

accomplished in accordance with the appropriate virtue; then if this is so, the human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (1.7)<sup>1</sup>

The ethical demand on us is to develop our character to become a person of excellent ethical wisdom because, from that excellence, good actions will flow, leading to a good life. Virtuous actions come from a virtuous person; therefore, it is wise to focus on being a virtuous person.

For Aristotle, ethics is a science with objective rational principles that can be discovered and understood through reason. Whether a particular course of action is good or not, and whether a person is good or not, are ideas that can be understood objectively. The cultivation of virtue must be accompanied by a cultivation of rationality. Aristotle saw the human soul as having three components:

1. The **nutritive** part, responsible for taking in nutrition

1. <sup>2</sup>

2. [1]

2. The **sensitive** and appetitive part, responsible for sensing and responding to the environment, including the desires and appetites that motivate actions
3. The **rational part**, responsible for practical and productive intellect.

All three components are essential to being a human, but they exist in a clear hierarchy, with the faculties of reason at the top; these can and should control and guide the appetites into productive and ethical actions. Aristotle characterizes the desiring and emotional part of the soul as partaking of reason insofar as it complies with reason and accepts its leadership. The person of good virtue has cultivated a stable soul that is not swayed by appetites or desires but is governed by reason. Being ethical, then, is a skill that one develops. Just as you can become good at math or playing a musical instrument through practice, you can also become a virtuous person through practice. When you have reached a certain level of skill in math or playing music, you no longer need a teacher to guide you, and you quickly can understand what to do. The same is true in

Aristotle's conception of ethical decision making — it becomes an ingrained habit.

How can the rational human come to understand what proper ethical actions are? Aristotle's answer is his doctrine of the mean, or the balanced course of action:

Virtue is a state of character concerned with a choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6)

We see here Aristotle's emphasis on a virtuous character that enables us to make a rational ethical choice. There are two important aspects of this. The first is the concept of the choice lying in a mean relative to our circumstances, and the second is that what the mean is in any particular situation can be determined by the person of practical reason. The ethical course of action is relative to our particular circumstances, meaning that there is not one rule that fits all situations, but the ethical course of action is objectively true in that any rational person looking at the situation

will be able to understand the correct ethical course of action.

By the mean, Aristotle refers to something midway between two extremes. The virtuous act is the one that falls between the extremes of what is deficient and what is excessive relative to the situation.

All of the moral virtues are a mean between harmful extremes (too little, too much) in our actions and emotions:

### Sample Virtues as Means Between Extremes

Too Little	Mean (Virtue)	Too Much
Cowardice	Bravery	Foolhardiness
Stinginess	Generosity	Profligacy
Self-ridicule	Confidence	Boastfulness
Apathy	Calmness	Short-Temperedness

Sometimes the mean lies closer to one extreme than the other because of the particular circumstances involved. Because situations are different, it is not sufficient to say, "Be brave," because the mean of bravery differs from situation to situation. There are still ethical standards, but they are relative to the situation. It is always wrong


to eat too much, but “too much” will be different for each individual. That is why an emphasis on virtue — the ability to discern *how* to make ethical decisions — is the key to an ethical, good, and balanced life that is worth living.

The better you are at finding and acting on the mean, the more you have *phrónesis* (“practical wisdom”). This form of practical reason helps one recognize which features of a situation are morally relevant and how one can do the right thing in practice. Practical reason is rational because it is open to rational influence. Again, virtue is a learned skill. A person who listens to and learns from the reason of others is a rational person, and the same holds for ethics. As Aristotle sees it, every thought that one has and action that one takes, contributes to the development of either a virtue or a vice. Virtues such as temperance, courage, and truthfulness become increasingly a part of our actions the more we intend to do them and the more we practice doing them. The truly virtuous person:

- Knows what she or he is doing
- Chooses a virtuous act for its own sake
- Chooses as a result of a settled moral state

- Chooses gladly and easily

These are possible only through developing a virtuous disposition in which the soul is settled by reason. The more you practice virtue, the more you are capable of virtue because virtue becomes a way of life. Leading an objectively rational good life will produce a subjectively happy life of the kind appropriate to being human.



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# Thomas Aquinas on Virtue



*Figure 16.2: Thomas Aquinas. Public Domain*

Most of Aristotle's writings were lost to Western Europe up until the twelfth century. When Islam spread across Egypt, the Levant, and Persia in the seventh century, libraries of old Greek writings were found, including the works of Aristotle lost to the Latin-speaking world.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rush (Averroës), and other Islamic thinkers recognized the value of Aristotle and wrote commentaries on his works and other works extending his philosophy. Those Islamic works were discovered by Christians when they conquered central Islamic Spain in the mid-twelfth century. Like their Islamic counterparts a few centuries earlier, Christian scholars knew what

they had in the Islamic libraries. Works by Aristotle (who the Christian scholars knew from his logic books) were eagerly translated into Latin and distributed widely.

Aristotle's texts posed problems for Christian philosophers in reconciling them with Christian theology, which led to many arguments within the thirteenth-century Catholic Church. Enter Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who wrote the *Summa Theologia* (The Sum of Theological Knowledge), creating a system that could, as advertised, provide answers to all questions. Aquinas's philosophy was based on the writings of Aristotle, who he reverently called "The Philosopher" and placed as a source of truth almost on the same level as the Bible. You will see similarities between Aristotle's and Aquinas's ethical systems.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas based ethics on the pursuit of our proper human end. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas believed that our proper human end of *eudaimonia* is not found in this world. Aquinas believed Aristotle's system was as good as humans could achieve on the basis of the natural realm, but our end as humans is to be perfected through union with God. For Aquinas, every event occurs because

there is some end toward which things are directed, and we humans, like everything else in the universe, have our own ends. Unlike everything else, we as humans can consciously choose which ends we pursue, and ethics concerns which ends are worth our efforts to pursue. Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that ethical understanding comes through virtue and that virtue is a skill that must be developed. Also like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that we learn what is ethical through our reason, which we can use to uncover God's natural law imbued in creation. By rationally reflecting on what is in accord with nature and our own natural inclinations, we can understand the ethical virtues.

Aquinas's Aristotelian idea that humans can rationally understand ethical principles had to deal with the Christian concept that humanity's sinful nature prevented such understanding. He held that sin affects our moral life but not our rational life, clearing the way for the use of our human intellect to learn ethical truths. He borrowed from Islamic philosophers the conception that intellect is both passive and active. Intellect passively takes in sense experience and ideas but actively processes them to abstract universal truths. This is a natural process inherent in the human mind,

without requiring illumination from God, and unaffected by sin (as was commonly taught in Aquinas's time). The universals abstracted by the mind from multiple individuals (e.g., "triangle" can be abstracted from individual triangles) are tied to real features in the world, the universals created by God and first existing in the mind of God, who used them to create the objects in the world.

Put simply, we use our intellect to understand the world God has created. It is an orderly and purposeful world, with all of the objects in it receiving their purpose from God. By observing the world and reflecting on our observations, we can learn about the natural world, including God's ethical laws, which permeate the natural world. Aquinas used this conception to develop what we now know as "natural law" — the idea that ethical truths are ingrained in nature.

To be virtuous, we need to learn God's natural law that governs the motion of objects in nature and instructs us in ethical behaviour. To be rational, which is central to our human ends, requires intellectual discipline, but it is the way to virtue. Through self-discipline and reflecting on the natural law, we learn and develop as ingrained

habits the four cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, prudence, and justice. Virtuous persons practice the four cardinal virtues in their daily lives and from those virtues flow ethical behaviours in all situations.

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## **Buddhist Virtue Ethics**

Buddhism is a spiritual and philosophical tradition founded by Siddhārtha Gautama in India in the fifth century BCE. There are many schools of Buddhist thought in many countries, from monasteries devoted to religious ritual devotion to solitary practitioners of meditative practices. A common thread among most Buddhist schools of thought is an emphasis on a virtue ethical system that teaches the art of becoming balanced and harmonious through humility, with the goal of being free from *dukkha*, or suffering or anguish. We can free ourselves from suffering by extinguishing hatred and ignorance, following the teaching of the founder of Buddhism, Siddhārtha

Gautama, who became “Buddha,” which means “the Awakened One.”

Siddhartha Gautama taught that what could be called evil acts are performed out of ignorance and fear; therefore, rules and threats of punishment do not curtail these acts. We learn how to act in a suitable way (*sammā*, meaning best or most effective in the circumstances) by focusing on thinking suitably because our thoughts lead to our actions. Buddhism emphasizes what is suitable and unsuitable rather than on the Western sense of right and wrong or good and evil.

A life of virtue is outlined by the eightfold path:

1. Suitable view
2. Intention
3. Mindfulness
4. Concentration
5. Effort
6. Speech
7. Bodily conduct
8. Livelihood

By making one’s thoughts and actions suitable, one promotes positive outcomes and lessens harmful

outcomes. This is especially important to Buddhists because of Gautama's teaching about karma, which is a concept that underlies Buddhist ethics and differs significantly from the divine command ethics found in many religions.

The idea of karma is that it is a natural phenomenon that we can think of like the laws of physics. The law of karma says that thoughts and actions that intend to harm others will eventually cause harm to ourselves and that thoughts and actions that intend to benefit others will eventually benefit us. In the Buddhist conception of time, "eventually" could mean in a future life that is multiple reincarnations away, so Buddhists think less in terms of immediate consequences of thoughts and actions and more in terms of the intrinsic value of them. Karma is not a strict determinism in that we still have free will and can mitigate the consequences of karma through our virtuous thoughts and actions. To avoid future suffering in this life or future lives, a Buddhist focuses on developing inner virtue to be able to think and act suitably in order to avoid negative karma and generate positive karma. As with Aristotle's virtue ethics, the more you practice virtue, the more you are capable of virtue. Having

made a commitment to follow the eightfold path as a way of life, you are disposed to follow those rules.

## Chinese Virtue Ethics

For more than two millennia, Chinese philosophy has been dominated by two great traditions — Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism) — that have influenced China throughout its history and are still important to Chinese culture to this day. Both traditions are founded on their teaching of the *Dao*, which is best translated as “the way.” Dao is both a noun and a verb, so it is both how the universe is and how things behave properly. The Dao cannot be described completely in words but can be sensed as the source of all things and the rhythm of Being. All things come from Dao, and all things have their own Dao, or essence, which comes from the Cosmic Dao.

Adepts of both Confucianism and Daoism believe that to be in the Dao and in harmony with it is to be virtuous and at peace and that this state

of enduring harmony with the Dao, similar to Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, is the proper human goal. Both Confucianist and Daoist ethical systems teach that a community flourishes when its members are in harmony with the Dao and that the state flourishes when its leaders are in harmony with the Dao. However, Confucianism and Daoism are in disagreement about how communities and governments can keep in harmony with the Dao and, thus, promulgate different ideas about how to attain virtue.



*Figure 16.3: Confucius. Public Domain*

Confucianism is the social and ethical system set down by Kongzi (Master Kong) (c. 551–479 BCE), known in the West as Confucius. Kongzi saw the virtuous person as an artistic creation achieved through the diligent practice of ethical excellence by way of strict ritual

practice. Ritual, or *Li*, is the art and practice of crafting one's character from the raw material of

human nature. Just as a craftsperson uses tools to fashion wood or stone, a person uses ritual behaviours to carve and polish their character. *Li* extends to all aspects of life; Kongzi taught that our every action affects our character and our environment, so every activity needs to be performed with the proper respect and procedures.

Kongzi issued hundreds of rites in sayings covering many aspects of human life, including:

- How youth should behave toward their parents
- What colours of clothing one should wear and when
- How one should greet another person, protocols that should be observed at the court of the ruler
- And so on

All were to be strictly observed in order to cultivate the comprehensive ethical virtue known as *Ren*.

Most of the rites specified by Kongzi concern human interactions, reflecting the great importance he placed on suitably respecting one's

superiors. Ancient Chinese society was highly stratified, and Kongzi thought that maintaining the social hierarchy was essential to social order. Showing respect for one's superiors, such as government officials, elders, and ancestors, was more than polite; it was essential for society to function properly. Filial piety was more than respecting your family elders dead or alive; it was the fundamental building block of social harmony and justice. The more one practiced the rites, the more one developed virtue, most importantly the virtue of *Ren* or benevolence. *Ren* should be understood not as acts of kindness but as acts of propriety that create virtue in oneself and society. Practicing the rites virtuously brings each person and society in harmony with the Dao and leads to a good life for all.

The philosophy of Daoism has long provided a strong counterpoint to Confucianism. As the name implies, Daoism focuses on harmony with the Dao rather than on human teachings, the opposite of the Confucian emphasis on a system of ritual behaviour. Daoist ethics centers on the fundamental virtue of *wu wei*, meaning "effortless action." Daoism rejects formal ritual and deliberately striving for virtue, emphasizing

instead that virtue comes from naturalness, simplicity, and spontaneity. Daoism at times seems to be anti-civilization with its calls for us to detach from the artificiality of social traditions and rituals and to instead adopt a quiet life communing with nature. At other times, though, Daoism attempts to reform society, especially its leaders:

If you want to be a great leader, you must learn to follow the Dao. Stop trying to control. Let go of fixed plans and concepts and the world will govern itself. The more prohibitions you have, the less virtuous people will be. (Laozi [ca. 400-250 BCE] 1991, Chapter 57)

The Daoist idea is that separating ourselves from nature is separating ourselves from the Dao and that what most contributes to this separation from the Dao are the social institutions of government, military, and other social hierarchies and power structures. The Daoist virtue of *wu wei* involves a life of walking away from the artificial trappings of human pretension and arrogance and shaping your actions according to what others think of you. Instead, a Daoist seeks a oneness with the rhythms

of nature, which probably requires walking away from society itself.

Deliberately, Daoism does not provide a set of rules and rituals because central to Daoist philosophy is the idea that ritual does not cultivate virtue. Instead, Daoism provides guidelines on cultivating the virtues of selflessness, moderation, detachment, and humility. Accordingly, Daoist philosophers did not publish books detailing ritual practices like Confucians did. Instead, Daoists created poetry and stories that show Daoist sages teaching about and exemplifying these virtues.

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## **Objections to Virtue Ethics**

There are two main objections to virtue ethics as an ethical system: its vagueness and its relativism.

# Vagueness

First, virtue ethics is too vague and subjective and does not produce explicit rules for moral conduct that can tell us how to act in specific circumstances. When facing ethical dilemmas, we feel better if we have a clear answer about what to do. Virtue ethics offers general ideals rather than definitive commands. We can create laws based on a definitive ethic against stealing, but we cannot make laws saying “be wise” or “be patient.” Also problematic is that virtue ethics tends to hold that its virtues apply variably according to the situation. It is far easier to practice the principles of never lying or always being generous. Virtue ethics says there are times when lying is a better course of action and being generous is a worse course of action, and this variability creates uncertainty. What is more, how can you decide when the virtue applies and when it should not? Telling you to be wise and reflect on the ethical virtues and the situation is offering more vagueness. Finally, we want to be able to rely on other people’s behaviour, and those who practice virtue ethics may vary in their behaviour, so we may not know exactly where we stand with them.

To consider this objection, we need to think about the nature of ethics itself. Yes, we could say definitively, “You should not lie,” and, “you should not steal.” But what are these prohibitions based on? A virtue ethicist could respond by arguing that both are based on the ethical principle of honesty and that, if that is so, then cultivating the virtue of honesty will lead one not to lie or steal from others. A virtue ethicist would also say that virtue ethics focuses on the foundation of ethical life encapsulated in objective reason (Aristotle), God’s natural law (Thomas), the law of karma (Buddhism), or the Dao (Confucianism or Daoism), and therefore, virtue is not entirely variable. Virtue ethics provides us with the tools to make ethical decisions in the varying circumstances of our daily lives. The variability in the behaviour of those who practice virtue ethics reflects the variability of everyday life.

## **Relativism**

Second, there are different cultural definitions of human flourishing and virtue. All human cultures

have ethical values, but values vary across cultures. So, how can we decide which set of virtues is right? Even within a culture, two people will have different views about what the virtues are, and when and how they apply. Because virtue ethics gives us no specific commands for how to act, each person is left to themselves to decide how to act. Virtue ethics is too relative to be a helpful ethical theory.

Ethical relativism is a concern. If ethics means anything, it has to have some objective basis and cannot be left entirely up to arbitrary whim. Virtue ethicists are aware of this danger and would respond to it that virtue ethics is based on objective realities of the world and human nature. The virtues are manifestations of how things are or should be, outside of cultural or individual subjectivity. Different cultures differ on how ethical virtues should be applied, but every culture values fundamental virtues, such as honesty, benevolence, courage, and justice. Differences in how cultures apply virtues may reflect objective differences in their circumstances. When we interact with another culture, those differences do need to be dealt with, but saying our culture is completely right and the other wrong is not a

helpful approach. Individuals similarly face the burden of needing to determine how best to apply the virtues and needing to deal with conflicts with others over how they think is best to apply the virtues. But is this not similar to the decisions we have to make in all aspects of our lives?

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1. References to Aristotle are formatted using the book and chapter of the text. This citation, for example, corresponds to Book 1, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. ↩

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## How to Cite This Page

Giles, Douglas. 2024. "On Virtue Ethics" In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/on-virtue-ethics/>.

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# Feminism and Feminist Ethics

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# Introduction

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In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, early feminist writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), began to address topics related to the political, economic, and educational status of women and “women’s morality” (Tong and Williams 2018). This was partly motivated by a growing awareness of the real inequalities between men and women, including legal and social restrictions and prohibitions. These authors argued that disparities in educational opportunities and the restrictions across race and gender of roles and responsibilities open to women prevented women from fully developing as people and citizens (Wollstonecraft [1792] 2004). This was First Wave feminism, and it accomplished significant progress on emancipation and enfranchisement for women and visible minorities in the West.



*Figure 17.1: Betty Friedan.  
Public Domain*

In the twentieth century, Betty Friedan (1921–2006) reported similar phenomena among her white university-educated peers in the 1950s United States, who had returned to the home to be full-time housewives. Friedan wrote that this group of women appeared to

suffer a sort of stunting, an erosion of their abilities, and a freezing of personal, intellectual, and moral development into a childlike and immature state (Friedan [1963] 1997). It should be noted, though, that this was not the experience of black women in the US, who often worked outside the home, frequently in the employ of white women, nor the experience of working-class women across races (Collins 1989). However, women found significant commonalities among themselves in the disparity of political and employment rights compared to men in their social groups (Thompson 2002). Around the same

time in France, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) published her seminal work examining the situation of women in French society, describing women’s second-class status as founded upon the social and political interpretations of biological differences between male and female (de Beauvoir [1949] 2014).

The work of de Beauvoir, Friedan, and many others spurred Second Wave feminism among women in Europe and North America, as they began to examine anew the cultural, political, and moral positions that women occupied. Second Wave feminists focused their efforts on such issues as reproductive rights, domestic and sexual violence, paid maternity leave, and equal pay in the workplace.


While issues surrounding women’s political and moral development had long been a concern to feminists of the First and Second waves, it was around the end of the Second Wave and the beginning of the current Third Wave (roughly around the late 1980s and early 1990s) that writers began to think about the need for a specifically feminist ethics. Up to this point, moral theories (like deontology or consequentialism) had largely

ignored or remained unaware of the specific perspective and experiences of women, privileging the experiences and perspectives of the “universal” or “neutral” position. Feminists, however, pointed out that this “universal” perspective was a specifically white male perspective.

Alison Jaggar wrote that one problem with traditional ethics at the time was (and potentially still is) that it views the moral issues that arise in the so-called private world — the realm in which women do housework and take care of children, the ill or infirm, and the elderly — as trivial. In its formulation of the “neutral” perspective, traditional ethics was charged with favouring “male” ways of moral reasoning that emphasized rules, rights, universality, and impartiality over “female” ways of moral reasoning that emphasize relationships, responsibilities, particularity, and partiality. Additionally, Jaggar points out that traditional ethics had under-rated culturally feminine traits like “interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life” (Jaggar 1992, 363–364).

Thus, an ethics that paid particular attention to

these traditionally undervalued virtues, principles, values, perspectives, and ways of knowing was required to provide a full understanding of human experiences and moral life. In the Third Wave, feminists began to criticize and discuss the various shortcomings of the Second Wave, including its marginalization of the voices and perspectives of women of oppressed races, ethnicities, sexual identities, and socioeconomic positions (Combahee River Collective 1977; Mohanty, Torres, and Russo 1991). A feminist ethic that paid attention to these different identities and perspectives became centrally important to taking women's lives and experiences seriously and central to eliminating oppression of women, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups. Thus, Jaggar framed feminist ethics as the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women.



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# The Ethics of Care

Care ethics, as it has become known, is an early feminist ethic that arose out of reactions to popular psychoanalytical accounts of male and female development in the mid-twentieth century and the questioning of women's roles in society. This ethic began from observational studies in psychology and later became a positive normative account of moral behaviour. The early formulations of care ethics were criticized by both feminist theorists and philosophers working in other moral traditions. The objections to these early formulations are important and have led to useful and interesting developments. Care ethics has advanced as a normative theory, but has perhaps made its strongest contribution as a meta-ethic, a position from which to begin our moral reasoning, rather than as a tool to use in sorting out particular moral cases or dilemmas.

# Early Formulation

In her psychological analysis of women's moral decision-making in the 1980s, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan claimed that she found a difference in the way men and women perceived moral problems. While men focused on justice and rights, women were more likely to think about relationships in making moral decisions. In examining the question of abortion, Gilligan wrote:

[W]omen's construction of the moral problem as a problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than as one of rights and rules ties the development of their moral thinking to changes in their understanding of responsibility and relationships....Thus the logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach. (Gilligan 1982, 73)

For Gilligan, this ethic of care particular to women develops in three stages. First, a woman exhibits

a focus on caring for the self in order to ensure survival, which is accompanied by a transitional phase in which this mode of thinking about the self as primary is criticized as selfish. Following this critical phase, a new understanding of the connections between one's self and others leads to the development of a concept of responsibility. Gilligan wrote that this concept of responsibility is fused with a "maternal morality," which is focused on ensuring care for the dependent and unequal people in one's circle. At this stage, the Good is defined in terms of caring for others. However, Gilligan continues, too much of a focus on others in this second stage of moral development leads to an imbalance of attention, which means that a woman must reconsider the balance between self-sacrifice and the kinds of care included in conventional ideas of feminine goodness. The third phase, then, is one which balances the self with others and focuses on relationships and a new understanding of the connections between the self and others. The central insight in this ethic of care, Gilligan writes, is that the self and others are interdependent (Gilligan 1982).

A few years after Gilligan, Nel Noddings published *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and*

*Moral Education*, which provided a deeper analysis into the people — the care provider and the care receiver — and the processes involved in caring. In this book, Noddings argued that morality requires a person to have two emotions. The first of these emotions is a sentiment of “natural care.” Noddings describes this care as pre-ethical; the care-taking that a mother engages in for her child, or a maternal animal for her offspring are equally examples of this natural care. As Gilligan also argued, Noddings says that concern for others, or recognition of others’ concern for us, gives rise to a conflict between responding to the needs of others and taking care of our own needs. This conflict gives rise, in turn, to the opportunity for “ethical caring,” or responding to the recognition that another has needs and that we are in a position to meet these needs, and further acknowledging that this situation makes a moral claim on us. However, in many cases, we can recognize and respond to another’s needs by way of natural care, a disposition to care for the other that arises spontaneously in us, rather than by way of ethical care, which one would only act from if natural care has failed. In this way, natural care is preferable to ethical care on Noddings’ account (Noddings 1984).

# Objections

A number of objections have been raised to Gilligan's and Noddings' formulations of care ethics within psychology, moral theory, and feminist thought. Of those raised by feminists, the most powerful objections focus on the potential for care ethics to "essentialize" the caring relationship. This objection says that care ethics may reduce the relationship of care to essential features linked to a "woman's nature" in a way that calls upon and reinforces gender-based stereotypes (e.g. women are more sensitive and caring than men). These objections stress that even if women are (for social, cultural, biological, or interconnected reasons) better at providing or giving care than are men, it may still be "epistemically, ethically, and politically imprudent to associate women with the value of care" (Tong and Williams 2018). The worry is that intimately linking women with caring may "promote the view that women are in charge of caring or, worse, that because women *can* care, they *should* care no matter the cost to themselves" (Tong and Williams 2018; emphasis added).

From a Marxist-inspired feminist perspective,

Sandra Lee Bartky (1935–2016) expands on this worry in her 1990 book, *Femininity and Domination*. Bartky argues that, rather than providing women with a valued and esteemed role in a man's world, women's activities in "building men's egos and binding men's wounds" ultimately disempower women (Tong and Williams 2018). She claims that the kind of affective labour (work that significantly involves one having or showing certain emotions) undertaken by women in providing care for a family, and in some service-oriented occupations, causes them to disconnect from their own basic emotions and feelings. In service occupations, such as being a flight attendant, Bartky says the employee must force their own feelings into the background and be nice (for example), regardless of the behaviour of the client in front of them. This kind of emotional labour risks blurring the distinction between "real" feelings of wanting to be friendly and nice and "inauthentic" feelings generated by the employment obligation to be friendly and nice.

In the home, something similar happens. Bartky writes that many wives and mothers say that the experience of caring for their husbands and children, even when difficult, provides their lives

with fulfillment and meaning. The more they care, the more they view themselves as the glue of the family that holds everything together for everyone else (Tong and Williams 2018). But, and importantly for Bartky, such subjective feelings of empowerment are not the same as actually having power. A lack of power in the family means that a woman is obligated to take on these caring roles and, like the flight attendant, to force her own feelings down when they do not match with the expected behaviour of a good wife or mother. So, like in employment situations, the required emotional work within the family risks blurring the distinction between a woman's real feelings of care and satisfaction with feelings generated by her sense of obligation and of what it means to properly perform her role.

In employment and in the household, a woman's emotional exploitation is linked closely to her economic and material oppression. Marxist-inspired feminists, such as Ann Ferguson, have argued that economic disadvantage within the household is analogous to capitalist exploitation of labourers. Ferguson analyses the "sexual division of labor" within a household, in which women are responsible for producing four main categories of

goods: children, household maintenance, care (of children and of men), and sex (Ferguson 1991). Women and girls are taught to take pride and satisfaction in the production of these goods, while men learn that these are women's work and, therefore, not their responsibility. At the same time, the production of these goods is devalued, and the desire to do this work is connected to the idea of "being a woman." Thus, the labour that goes into the production of these things goes largely unrecognized.

Bartky argues that in providing this care to her husband or children, a woman is exploited in such a way that her family benefits and has their interests advanced while she suffers damage to her own interests. In a similar vein, Sheila Mullet argues that when material conditions of oppression appear within a household, they prevent real relationships of care from forming. She argues that a woman is not in a position to truly care for someone if she is economically, socially, or psychologically forced to do so (Mullet 1988). Thus, real caring cannot occur under conditions characterized by domination and subordination. Only if women are fully equal to men can women take on the emotional work of

care without fearing that men will take advantage of their labour.

## **Responses and Developments**

Care ethics has continued to advance in recent years, in part by responding to the objections of various feminist and non-feminist thinkers. Care ethics made an important and valuable contribution in identifying that people are necessarily interconnected beings. The importance of care for morality and personal development gave rise to theories incorporating relational and intersectional conceptions of various ethical values, which will be discussed below.

A number of authors, such as Virginia Held and Eva Feder Kittay, have continued to develop care ethics into both a moral theory and a kind of meta-ethical framework, from which ethical obligations can be derived and in which certain moral principles and values may be grounded. There are three foundational theoretical commitments in the

ethics of care that have been established amongst care theorists at this point (Sander-Staudt 2017):

1. Persons are understood to have varying degrees of dependence and interdependence (which will be discussed further in the following section, "Relational Theory"). This perspective in care ethics contrasts with deontological and consequentialist moral theories that often view persons as having independent interests.
2. Care ethics holds that anyone who is particularly vulnerable to one's choices and their outcomes deserves extra consideration when making decisions.
3. The contextual details of situations must be part of the decision-making process, in order to safeguard and promote the actual interests of those concerned.

Further, in keeping with some of Noddings' early views, Held and Kittay have argued that the principle of justice can be grounded in care. Held has said that while care can exist without justice, as it may do within unjust family relationships, justice cannot exist without care. In order for an inkling of

justice to take shape in our minds, we must first express concern for the condition of another, and this is an expression of care. So, care is “deeply fundamental,” perhaps an ethical proto-value, motivating any further moral sentiment (Held 2005, 17; Tong and Williams 2018).

In criticising Rawlsian formulations of justice as fairness, Kittay has argued that relationships of dependency characterized by care are such a fundamental part of human life that any theory of justice that leaves these out cannot achieve a just or fair society. Given that each person will experience dependency upon someone who takes on the responsibility to care for them in prolonged and significant episodes throughout one’s life, such relationships and the shift in power, labour, and interests that happen within them must be attended to by any theory attempting to form a fair distribution of benefits and goods in society. An ethic of care, thus, must be central to formulations of justice (Kittay 1997).

Furthermore, Held sees care ethics as a normative moral theory, something that can provide robust tools for determining morally good outcomes in specific dilemmas or challenges. By denying the

appeal to universal moral principles, valuing emotional responses, and looking at the specific relationships that we have with those “particular others for whom we take responsibility,” Held argues that care ethics can provide answers about what we ought to do in specific scenarios (Held 2005, 10).

However, even moral theorists who do not explicitly subscribe to an ethics of care may recognize the meta-ethical contribution it makes to our understanding of human interaction and moral life. The first of the three theoretical commitments of care ethics — that humans are essentially social and interconnected beings with varying degrees of independence and not the sort of entities that pop into existence entirely able to support themselves or fully develop in the absence of social relationships characterized by interdependence and care — has had significant influence on the development of relational theories of identity and agency, as we shall see below. Thus, the meta-ethical notions grounding care ethics have become ingrained in feminist understandings of moral psychology, personal autonomy, rights, and responsibility.

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# Relational Theory

A meta-ethics of care provides the background for a group of ideas sometimes called “relational theory.” Here, relational autonomy and relational identity will be discussed specifically. Natalie Stoljar writes that the term “relational” makes a meta-physical claim, which denies a notion of “atomistic” personhood, “emphasizing instead that agents are socially and historically embedded, not metaphysically isolated, and are, moreover, shaped by factors such as race and class” (Stoljar 2015). Thus, the insights provided by early formulations of care ethics provide a portion of the meta-physical and meta-ethical starting point for seeing persons as always and unavoidably interconnected. In other words, insights from care ethics provide foundational building-block concepts for an interpretation of reality and what our moral theories should take into account. Thus, interpersonal and social-group relations are an important feature of the world and must

accordingly form an important part of our moral theorizing.

## **Autonomy**

When referring to autonomy, Stoljar writes that the term “relational” may serve to deny that autonomy requires self-sufficiency, as it had traditionally been formulated. In most pre-feminist formulations of autonomy, especially following the development by various scholars of Immanuel Kant’s theory, a model of cool and detached reasoning, unconcerned with personal or familial commitments, became a requirement of independent decision-making. However, this way of thinking about autonomy is problematic because, under such requirements, one must either acknowledge that no person fully meets the criteria, or willfully ignore that any person’s ability to be independent is facilitated by the ongoing care provided to them by others. If we move away from this idea of what autonomy means, and acknowledge that relationships of care and interdependence are valuable and morally

significant, then as Stoljar argues, any useful theory of autonomy must at least “be ‘relational’ in the sense that it must acknowledge that autonomy is compatible with the agent standing in and valuing significant family and other social relationships” (Stoljar 2015).

In response, many theorists working on questions of agency, decision theory, and ethics, among other areas, have adopted an account of autonomy that is relational (Christman 1991; Westlund 2009; Benson 1991). Relational theories of autonomy generally start with the minimal acknowledgment that we begin as non-autonomous beings, as infants, and develop into autonomous beings gradually as we learn various skill sets and gain specific abilities central to making our own decisions, from the mundane to the momentous. Many relational theories of autonomy also take into account that our autonomy is impacted by the process of socialisation (Benson 1991; Meyers 1987) or may be suspended at various times in our lives. For example, we may become gravely ill and become comparatively much more dependent upon others for the duration of the illness. We may also become less autonomous as we enter into the

later decades of life. Autonomy, thus, may be something that is a matter of degrees or stages of life (Meyers 1987; Friedman 1997). Relational theories of autonomy can account for these facts of human existence, attending to the importance of our close relationships in facilitating decision-making and the achievement of a good and satisfying life.

# Identity

Relational identity is another theoretical perspective on human development and experience that is meta-ethically informed by care and recognition of intersectionality: the intersecting identities people hold. Intersectionality was conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reflecting the reality of



*Figure 17.2: Kimberlé Crenshaw. (Badarne 2018) CC BY-SA 2.0*

black women’s identities as being formed within the hierarchical power structures of both gender and race (as well as class, sexual orientation, ability, and so on) (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). In political or social movements oriented around “single-axis” issues (e.g. exclusively race or exclusively gender), Crenshaw argued that people with more than one of these identities were further marginalized. Crenshaw’s work is politically

important and important to a feminist ethic that seeks, as Jaggar said, to theorize for all oppressed people and especially women. The acceptance of intersectionality has led to a recognition that persons are complex and may simultaneously experience realms of their identity that are privileged while other realms of their identity are oppressed. A feminist ethic must begin from the recognition of these intersecting dynamics of power within and among individual women and social groups.

As such, Françoise Baylis and Margaret Urban Walker have separately argued that the formation of the self and personal identity are ongoing social processes, happening with other people and the systems around us. Baylis writes that, since persons are interdependent beings, a person's identity, "including her traits, desires, beliefs, values, emotions, intentions, memories, actions, and experiences," is informed by her relationships, which have varying degrees and kinds of intimacy and interdependence (Baylis 2011, 109). A person's public and private interactions help structure her perception of herself and define her place in the world.

For relational identity theorists, a person is importantly constituted by the relationships and interactions they have. Baylis writes that one's identity exists in the "negotiated spaces between my biology and psychology and that of others," forming a "balance between self-ascription and ascription by others" (Baylis 2011, 110). Certain parts of yourself may feel like they were created by you or perhaps were "always there," in the sense that you might not be able to easily identify the source of influence that shaped them, but all parts of you are (in)formed by interactions with the social and political world. This way of conceptualizing identity pays attention to the fact that, as infants, we enter a world already full of meaning. The particular meanings attached to our bodies (e.g., skin colour, biological sex, or physical ability) and certain personal characteristics (e.g., gender expression or sexual identity) precede us in space and time. As Walker writes, women and men in situations of oppression or subordination may find themselves subject to socially normative narratives about their identities, which are coercive and disadvantaging (Walker 1997). These narratives exist in the world into which a person is born and grows up, impacting many aspects of

their identity formation and expression. The recognition that we only ever exist within such narratives and interpersonal relationships of various kinds, thus, forms the backdrop for relational theories of identity formation and maintenance.

## Conclusion

The development of feminist ethics stemmed from the recognition that the experiences and perspectives of some groups in society — including people of a minority race or ethnicity, people with disability status, people from lower socioeconomic levels, and women, as well as people whose identities cut across these groupings in various ways — had been ignored or devalued by mainstream or traditional ethics and has since been attempting to remedy this in conjunction with other anti-oppression movements. In a meta-ethics of care, the interdependence of human beings is taken as an enabling and necessary feature of life, rather than as something to be shaken off to achieve the greatest independence

of thought or feeling. By acknowledging that “independence” is only a relative state, and that we are all, to various degrees at different stages of life, dependent on others for care and survival, feminist ethicists have achieved a revision in the way that important moral concepts, such as autonomy and personal identity, are conceived. That much caring labour is yet under- or de-valued, that its performance often still falls to women within households and disproportionately to minority-group women in the workforce, and that women still face economic disadvantages as compared to men within their social and cultural groups, remains a challenge for feminist ethicists and political philosophers.

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# How to Cite This Page

MacKay, Kathryn. 2024. "Feminism and Feminist Ethics" In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/feminism-and-feminist-ethics/>.

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# Letter from the Birmingham City Jail

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# Introduction

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In this classic American text, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), one of the most hated people in the US at the time, outlines three major ideas:

1. He discusses the purpose and method of non-violent direct action.
2. He identifies white moderates as the principle roadblock in the struggle for equal rights, who hem and haw over civility and advise them to take things slow.
3. He sketches out the moral duty people have to adhere to Natural Law when it conflicts with human law.

In so doing, he canonizes civil disobedience in US cultural memory as a crucial method on the path to reforming society.

# Letter from the Birmingham City Jail

Birmingham City Jail

April 16, 1963

My dear Fellow Clergymen, While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of

the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliate organizations all across the South — one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible we share staff, educational, and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here. Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the

eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home town, and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country. You deplore the

demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps:

1. Collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive;
2. Negotiation;
3. Self-purification; and
4. Direct action.

We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial

injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants — such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises Rev. Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for

Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. As in so many experiences of the past we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?”

We decided to set our direct-action program around the Easter season, realizing that with the exception of Christmas, this was the largest shopping

period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action, we felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the merchants for the needed changes. Then it occurred to us that the March election was ahead, and so we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that Mr. Connor was in the run-off, we decided again to postpone action so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. At this time we agreed to begin our nonviolent witness the day after the run-off.

This reveals that we did not move irresponsibly into direct action. We too wanted to see Mr. Connor defeated; so we went through postponement after postponement to aid in this community need. After this we felt that direct action could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask, Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your

call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic

heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, "Why didn't you give the new administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive

resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from the devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant

"never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro

brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" men and "colored";

when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” — then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s

decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask: “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just laws and there are unjust laws. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that “An unjust law is no law at all.”

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law

that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is morally right, and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority

inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured?

These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just

on its face but unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I hope you can see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist would do. This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on television screaming "nigger, nigger, nigger") and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality

expressing the very highest respect for law.

Of course there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that, if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith

are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's "Counciler" or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people

of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured

as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But can this assertion be logically made? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delvings precipitated the misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because His unique God consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an

individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but is it possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry? It has taken Christianity almost 2,000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will

have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.

We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of the extremist. I started thinking about the fact that

I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation, and of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because at points they profit by segregation, have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred and comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated

Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable “devil.” I have tried to stand between these two forces saying that we need not follow the “do-nothingism” of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I’m grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss us as “rabble rousers” and “outside agitators” — those of us who are working through the channels of nonviolent direct action — and refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot

remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept in by what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. Recognizing this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand public demonstrations. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence.

This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, "Get rid of your discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. Now this approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that I was initially disappointed in being so categorized.

But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice — "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ — "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist — "Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist — "I will stay in jail to the end of my days

before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist — "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist — "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice — or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime — the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above His environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too small in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in eloquent, prophetic, and understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen who see them as "dirty nigger lovers." They, unlike so many of their

moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white Church and its leadership. Of course there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Rev. Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non-segregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the Church. I do not say that as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the Church. I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the Church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been

sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white Church. I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power

structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the

twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a tail-light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: "Who worships here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised, and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency

to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the Church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the Church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformist.

There was a time when the Church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a

town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the Church as never before. If the Church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early Church, it will lose its

authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the Church has risen to outright disgust.

Maybe again I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual Church, the church within the Church, as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone through the highways of the South on torturous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been kicked out of their churches and lost

the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have gone with the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. These men have been the leaven in the lump of the race. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the Gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

I hope the Church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the Church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of

history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our foreparents labored in this country without wages; they made cotton "king"; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation — and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

I must close now. But before closing I am impelled to mention one other point in your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commend the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I don't believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don't

believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young Negro boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.

It is true that they have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the demonstrators. In this sense they have been rather publicly "nonviolent." But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong or even more so to use moral means to

preserve immoral ends. Maybe Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather publicly nonviolent, as Chief Pritchett was in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of flagrant injustice. T. S. Eliot has said that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose, facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two year old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to

ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and nonviolently sitting-in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, and thus carrying our whole nation back to great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written a letter this long (or should I say a book?). I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been

writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and

in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

Martin Luther King, Jr.

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## How to Cite This Page

Luther, Martin K. Jr. 2024. "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail." In *Introduction to Ethics*, edited by Jenna Woodrow, Hunter Aiken, and Calum McCracken. Kamloops, BC: TRU Open Press. <https://introductiontoethics.pressbooks.tru.ca/chapter/letter-from-the-birmingham-city-jail/>.

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# Version History

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