

Ethics in a Nutshell

An Intro for Ethics Bowlers

Second Edition



Matt Deaton, Ph.D.

**Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers,
Second Edition by Matt Deaton, Ph.D.**

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Dedicated to Justin and Emily: may the proliferation of high school ethics bowls ensure a more just world for you and yours. Love, Dad

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This book covers the basic framework of what you'd likely learn in any good introductory college ethics course: what academic philosophy is, how philosophical ethics is distinct from other forms of moral reasoning, the problems with moral subjectivism, the four dominant ethical theories, the role of our moral intuitions, how to construct and evaluate arguments by analogy, and how to arrive at an all-things-considered judgment that takes into account all of the above.

I wrote the first version for students in my applied ethics courses at the University of Tennessee, where I had the pleasure to teach Business Ethics, Contemporary Moral Issues, Professional Responsibility, Engineering Ethics and Bioethics—first as a graduate teaching associate, and briefly as a lecturer after finishing my graduate work in 2011. I later expanded and revised it to share with the high school ethics bowl community, and revised the version you're reading right now again in 2013 for that same purpose.

Should you find any sections unclear, troubling, or just plain wrong, by all means, shoot me an email at matt@mattdeaton.com and let me know. I'll address them in a future edition, and may even credit

you by name in a footnote.¹ Bonus points if you find any typos.

The intent of the book isn't to replace whatever method you currently use to think through moral questions. Rather, its intent is to expose you to the way philosophers think through moral questions, with the hope that you'll find some of it worth making your own. You be the judge of what's worth taking and what's worth leaving—let reason and common sense be your guide.

Of course this book is also intended to provide a firm foundation for aspiring and actual ethics bowl competitors. For information on those wonderful events visit the official site of the annual National High School Ethics Bowl at the University of North Carolina, nhseb.unc.edu, the site of the Squire Family Foundation (which supports and promotes ethics bowls nationwide), SquireFoundation.org, or a site I run, EthicsBowl.org.

Or just shoot me an email—I'm always eager to talk ethics bowl. In fact, if you're ever in a position to found a new bowl, I'm here to help—happy to send you a copy of “Organizing a High School Ethics Bowl: A Comprehensive Guide,” different materials to help you get started, and provide free consultation throughout the process.

¹ In fact, many thanks to Ben Masaoka, ethics bowl coach at Roosevelt High School in Seattle, and Roberta Israeloff, friend and colleague at the Squire Family Foundation, for their help in improving this edition.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT'S "ETHICS?"

The U.S. Senate has an “ethics” committee, many companies have an official “ethics” code, and attorneys are required to take “ethics” training. But when academic philosophers use the term “ethics” they’re talking about *the reason-guided study of what we morally ought to do*.

That isn’t to say that senators, companies and lawyers don’t use reason (most certainly do), or don’t make decisions about what we morally ought to do (most certainly try). It just means that what makes philosophical ethics distinct is that the ultimate grounding for philosophers’ conclusions is reason itself, as opposed to constituent preferences, company policy, or legal precedent.

Philosophers use reason to form “arguments,” which are composed of a series of claims, called premises, intended to logically support another claim, called the conclusion. They construct, share, evaluate and revise these arguments in a collective effort to figure out what makes the most sense. No conclusion is beyond revision, and any good philosopher is willing to change his or her mind on most any issue, if given good enough reason to do so.

PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS, RELIGION, AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Religious persons sometimes worry that thinking through ethical questions from any perspective other than a religious perspective is disrespectful to their faith. However, many professional philosophers are devoutly religious, and many religious professionals are well studied in philosophy. Some separate their personal religious convictions from their philosophical reasoning, keeping the two realms distinct. “Reason leads me to conclude X,” they might say, “but my faith leads me to conclude *not* X.”

How people reconcile conflicts between their non-religious and religious views is of course up to them. I personally use philosophy to inform my religious understanding and vice versa. Along with many others, I figure if a creator gave us these big brains, he, she, or it would expect and want us to use them—not simply to better understand the natural world for scientific and technological purposes, but the moral world so we can make better decisions.

Therefore it would perhaps be a waste, *and maybe even a dishonor*, if we *didn't* utilize our intellectual abilities to think through life's big questions, including big questions concerning what we morally ought to do. You're of course free to use the philosopher's approach to morality however you see fit. The point is simply that philosophy isn't necessarily hostile to religion. In fact, many believe philosophy and religion are quite complementary.

ENABLING INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

One benefit of being able to think through moral and political issues from a philosophical perspective is that it facilitates conversation with virtually anyone, whereas only being able to think from a religious perspective limits deliberation to those who happen to share your faith. For example, if in discussing the death penalty I assert a position that rests on a key quote from the New Testament, my argument may impress Christians, but it isn't likely to convince an Agnostic, Jew, Muslim, Atheist, Hindu, or any other non-Christian. These persons may respect the New Testament insofar as they acknowledge that it is important to and carries weight *for me*. But from their perspective, it has little further authority.

Similarly, if someone were to respond to my position on the death penalty by citing the Koran, their point would have little purchase in my mind, for I'm not Muslim. I would recognize that *they* consider the book holy, and respect it insofar as I respect them. But scripture from the Koran doesn't carry nearly the same weight for non-Muslims as it does for Muslims.

Thankfully, philosophical ethics can facilitate discussion amongst persons from a variety of backgrounds, committed to a variety of religious and areligious perspectives. This is because philosophical ethics utilizes considerations almost everyone recognizes as morally relevant, and the fact that philosophers judge reasons and arguments based on their logical force.

This ability to transcend “comprehensive doctrines” enables moral progress where it might otherwise flounder, which is especially useful for those of us living in multicultural democracies, where we risk disrespecting our fellow citizens when our policy preferences are not based in reasons they can appreciate.² In fact, some have argued thinking through issues from a “public” perspective, and engaging in open deliberation on political issues that affect us all, is actually required by the Golden Rule—a matter of treating others the way we would like to be treated.

² For example, imagine how disrespected you would feel if you were imprisoned for breaking a law that could only be justified by referencing Zoroastrianism.

CHAPTER 3: WHY ETHICS ISN'T ICE CREAM

While citing religious texts is a popular way to answer moral questions, many people refer to their upbringing, reflect on their society's values, and in tough cases simply flip a coin. *“Heads, and the death penalty is sometimes morally permissible – tails, and the death penalty is never morally permissible.”* Most people actually mix these approaches, drawing on their religious faith, familial and social values, and flipping coins only as a last resort. Why do philosophers insist that we use reason to answer ethical questions? Because it has proven itself useful in answering other sorts of questions.

For example, scientists don't rely on traditional knowledge or public opinion polls when trying to uncover the complexities of the natural world. If they did, we might still believe the earth is flat. Rather, scientists gather evidence, examine reasons for and against hypotheses, and draw conclusions based on the logical force behind those reasons.

Philosophers use reason in a similar way, in an attempt to answer similarly important questions. The difference is that while scientists concern themselves with empirical questions about physical things, and enjoy the luxury of producing testable data, philosophers concern themselves with non-empirical questions for which conclusive evidence is almost impossible to pin down.

For example, the temperature of a planet's surface can be measured with a thermometer, and a brain cell can be tested for cancer with a microscope. These are empirical, testable questions that we can conclusively answer by observing the physical world. However, determining whether an action is morally permissible, impermissible, forbidden or obligatory is a much less straightforward endeavor—no “goodometer” or “moralscope” exists to assist ethicists when attempting to answer moral questions.

This lack of a way to measure moral questions makes moral views more contentious. There's no arguing with a thermometer: it's either 95 degrees Fahrenheit on Mars or it's not; that brain cell is either cancerous or it isn't. But without the benefit of a goodometer or moralscope, it's more difficult to decisively settle disagreements among people with conflicting moral views—and boy, do people seem to hold conflicting moral views!

Does this mean there's no such thing as moral right and wrong? Does it mean ethics, morality—what we *ought* to do—is all just a matter of personal opinion?

A NEGATIVE ARGUMENT

People sometimes hastily conclude that since ethical questions can't be empirically proven one way or the other, and since there seems

to be much disagreement over whether certain actions are morally permissible, ethics must be a subjective matter—something that depends on an individual’s personal perspective, similar to which flavor of ice cream is most delicious.

Philosophers agree that which flavor of ice cream tastes most delicious is indeed a subjective matter. That is, the answer really does depend on whom you ask, and how they happen to perceive the interaction of their taste buds with the different chemicals in the different flavors of ice cream. Accordingly, it makes perfect sense to say, “Chocolate is the most delicious flavor of ice cream *for Matt*,” and simultaneously say, “Vanilla is the most delicious flavor of ice cream *for Lisa*.” These personalized claims for each individual are consistent with the nature of taste. However, most philosophers reject the idea that ethics is similarly subjective for two main reasons.

First, simply because a question can’t be empirically proved doesn’t mean it doesn’t have an objective answer. Take, for example, whether intelligent life exists beyond Earth. This is something current technology can’t conclusively confirm or deny. Maybe there are smart aliens out there—maybe there aren’t. Right now we can’t know for sure one way or the other.

Interestingly, those who have studied the issue disagree. Some scientists have concluded that intelligent life does most likely exist beyond Earth, and some have concluded that it most likely does not. Imagine that: equally intelligent people examining the same evidence

are reaching conflicting conclusions. Does this mean whether intelligent life exists beyond Earth is a subjective matter, similar to which flavor of ice cream is most delicious?

Of course not. Intelligent life either exists beyond Earth or it doesn't independent of our ability to know for sure, and independent of what scientists happen to think.³ It wouldn't make sense to say, "Intelligent life exists beyond earth, *for Dr. Smith*," or "Intelligent life does not exist beyond earth, *for Dr. Jones*." These personalized claims are inconsistent with the objective nature of existing, being alive, and being intelligent.

We might instead say that "Dr. Smith and Dr. Jones *disagree* over whether intelligent life exists beyond earth, and given current technologies, *we can't know for sure which of them is correct*." But recognizing their disagreement and our inability to confirm which is correct is very different from concluding that the object of their inquiry is itself a matter of personal opinion.

Similarly, the fact that we can't conclusively settle disagreement over ethical matters doesn't mean they are a matter of subjective opinion either. Dr. Smith and Dr. Jones may disagree just as vehemently over whether (and under exactly what circumstances)

³ In fact, even if every scientist were in complete agreement on the matter, the objective facts would not change—smart aliens do not pop in and out of existence depending on whether anyone believes in them. Similarly, scientists once universally believed the earth was flat. But their consensus that it was flat didn't make it flat, just like their current consensus that it's spherical doesn't make it spherical.

abortion is morally permissible as they disagree over the existence of intelligent alien life. And in both cases we may lack a fully conclusive way to determine which of them is correct. But that disagreement and our inability to conclusively settle it doesn't mean the moral permissibility of abortion is any more a mere matter of opinion than the existence of smart aliens is a mere matter of opinion.

A POSITIVE ARGUMENT

What I've just provided is an example of what philosophers sometimes call a "negative" argument—one that refutes a line of reasoning for a conclusion, rather than providing reasons to believe a conclusion. In this case I refuted the argument that moral disagreement implies moral subjectivism, but that does little to show that moral objectivism is necessarily true.

However, there is one very strong, albeit very simple, positive argument that gives us reason to believe ethical questions do indeed possess objective answers, and are most definitely not mere matters of opinion. And that argument concerns the ridiculous consequences of believing otherwise.

If we were to believe that moral questions were a matter of personal opinion, similar to which flavor of ice cream is most delicious, logical consistency would require that we endorse the claim that

virtually *any* action is morally permissible, *for any given person*—just like any flavor of ice cream could be most delicious, *for any given person*.

Subjectivism isn't a big deal when we're talking about ice cream. If Johnny sincerely believes *skunk oil* is the most delicious flavor, that's odd, but who cares—Johnny's just a weirdo, and we can respect his tastes...from a distance. However, what if Johnny's moral beliefs are just as repugnant? What if he sincerely believes it's morally permissible to *torture babies for fun*? Johnny doesn't have in mind scenarios where we're forced to choose between torturing a baby or some greater evil, such as allowing a madman to detonate a nuclear bomb in the middle of a crowded city. No, Johnny believes that torturing any baby at any time for any reason is completely morally acceptable—even if one does it just for kicks.

Here's the problem with being a moral subjectivist: it means that you cannot criticize another's ethical views, no matter how repugnant. When we equate ethics with ice cream, we have to agree that if Johnny really believes torturing babies for fun is morally permissible, torturing babies for fun *really is* morally permissible, at least for Johnny.⁴

But our good sense tells us that torturing babies for fun is *clearly* morally wrong, no matter how sincerely Johnny might believe it to be morally right. While moral subjectivism might be tacitly endorsed by

⁴ I use such an abhorrent example to make this point as vivid as possible.

those who haven't given the issue much thought, a moment's reflection shows us that its implications are completely inconsistent with our most fundamental notions of ethical right and wrong. Therefore, we must reject it.

Also, in case you're not yet convinced, notice that endorsing moral subjectivism would prevent us from criticizing those who would make us their victims. Suppose a person decided to torture *us* for fun. Were we moral subjectivists, we could protest and complain, but not on ethical grounds. We couldn't argue that what was being done to us was *evil* or *wrong* or *immoral*, for so long as our torturer believed what he was doing was morally OK, we'd have to agree that it is morally OK, *for him!*

We now have two strong arguments in favor of rejecting moral subjectivism: one negative, and one positive. First, the fact that we can't conclusively settle disagreement over ethical questions the way we might conclusively settle the current temperature in Vonore, TN doesn't make ethics a matter of personal opinion any more than it makes questions concerning the existence of intelligent aliens a matter of personal opinion. And second, moral subjectivism entails the absurd implication that whatever any person happens to believe is ethical *is in fact be ethical...for them*—examples of which conflict with our fundamental understanding of right and wrong.

Of course, the exact same considerations that lead us to conclude ethics can't be a matter of *personal* opinion give us good reason to

conclude ethics can't be a matter of *cultural* opinion, either. That is, grounding ethical rightness in a culture's beliefs is susceptible to the same criticisms as grounding ethical rightness in an individual's beliefs.

Just because cultures disagree over ethical matters doesn't mean ethics is a matter of opinion. And because a culture sincerely believes an action is ethically permissible, impermissible, forbidden or obligatory doesn't necessarily make it so. Even if every last citizen of Afghanistan believed it was immoral to educate women that wouldn't necessarily make it so. (More on this in the section on Morality vs. Legality below.)

CONFIDENCE AND HUMILITY

And so we have good reason to reject moral subjectivism and endorse some version of moral objectivism: the view that ethical questions have answers that do not depend on an individual or a culture's belief. Keep in mind though that this doesn't mean we necessarily *possess* those answers. It just means they're out there somewhere, and don't turn on what people happen to believe.

Philosophers have thought long and hard how to best discover those answers, and have developed several ethical theories in the process. But before we explore them we need to make three key distinctions that often confuse students new to philosophical ethics.

CHAPTER 4: THREE KEY DISTINCTIONS

PRESCRIPTIVE VS. PREDICTIVE

One thing that often confuses students new to ethics is that the words “should” and “ought” can be used in both a predictive and a prescriptive way. That is, the words can indicate both an expected future state and they can indicate a moral obligation.

For example, if I say that brushing your teeth *should* prevent cavities, I mean to convey that if you brush your teeth you’ll be less likely to suffer tooth decay than if you didn’t. However, if I said you *should* donate your toothbrush to a homeless person, this doesn’t mean I necessarily *expect* you to do so. Rather, I’m making a prescriptive statement about doing what’s morally right. That is, I’m saying that you have a moral obligation to give your toothbrush to a homeless person. (Hopefully I’d provide an accompanying argument to support such a claim!)

The word “ought” is used in similarly different ways. If I say the Vols (the honorable and majestic college football team from Knoxville, Tennessee) *ought* to beat the Gators (the lowly and corrupt college football team from Gainesville, Florida) next fall, I’m making a statement about which team I expect to win as a matter of predicting the future—not that a Vol loss would somehow be immoral (though it

certainly feels that way sometimes).

However, if I say that we ought to boycott the Tennessee/Florida game altogether, to protest the mounting evidence that football causes serious brain injuries for many players, that's an ethical statement about doing what's right—not a prediction about what society (or I) will actually do.

So remember—the words “should” and “ought” are typically used in their prescriptive or evaluative sense when used in philosophical ethics, and not in their predictive sense.

MORALITY VS. PSYCHOLOGY

A distinct but similar confusion occurs when students attempt to answer moral questions by arguing how a person would be likely to behave under certain circumstances. For example, imagine that a loved one is dying of a rare disease, and the only medicine that can save him or her is too expensive for you or your family to afford. If you had no other way to save them, would it be morally permissible for you steal the medicine?

Before you answer, notice that I didn't ask if placed in such a situation whether you *would* steal the medicine. The question was whether you *should* steal the medicine. Predicting how you (or anyone) would be likely react under certain circumstances is distinct from how

you (or they) *should* react if you're to do what's morally right. As philosophers, it's our job to figure out what should be done, even if the majority of people would likely behave differently.

Put another way, just because everyone lies sometimes and some people commit murder doesn't mean lying or murder are morally permissible. So be sure to separate psychological propensity from moral permissibility.

MORALITY VS. LEGALITY

A third key distinction is that legal does not necessarily equal moral, and moral does not necessarily equal legal. As my philosophy of law professor used to say, "Good law *tracks* morality, but doesn't guarantee it."

What Dr. Reidy meant was that in most cases we desire our laws to be ethically just. But simply because something is legally allowed doesn't mean it's morally permissible, and simply because something is legally forbidden doesn't mean it's immoral. This becomes pretty obvious when we notice how laws differ according to time and location.

For example, as of this writing, it is legally permissible to smoke marijuana for recreational purposes in Colorado, but in Vermont it is not. In contrast, it is currently legally permissible for physicians to perform assisted suicides for certain patients in Vermont, but in

Colorado this would get a doctor arrested.

Surely if I were to take off from an airport in Denver, CO and land in Montpelier, VT the moral status of recreational marijuana use and physician-assisted suicide wouldn't somehow magically switch in mid-air.

Further, consider Oregon—a state in which both physician-assisted suicide and recreational marijuana smoking are legal, and Texas—a state in which both physician-assisted suicide and recreational marijuana smoking are illegal. Imagine if my plane took off from Denver, refueled in Portland, then traveled to San Antonio, then to Montpelier and back via some different route.

It would certainly make sense to say that physician-assisted suicide and recreational marijuana use became *legal* and *illegal* depending on location, for the legal status of an activity changes from geographical jurisdiction to jurisdiction. But it wouldn't seem to make much sense at all to say that physician-assisted suicide or recreational marijuana use changed from *moral* to *immoral* and back again depending on where I happened to be. (If I flew to a Taliban-controlled region of Afghanistan, would it suddenly become *immoral* to educate women?)

Further, if legality determined morality, legal progress would be very difficult. We couldn't say that this or that law *should* be made more just. We'd have to accept what the law currently *is*.

Thankfully, we're constantly attempting to make our laws better.

Whether citizens and officials are correct is another matter, but the point here is simply that morality precedes legality, not the other way around. America's founding fathers realized this, and that's one reason our Constitution includes not only a process whereby laws can be changed, but even a process whereby the Constitution itself can be changed. That's what "amendments" are, and presumably even the Constitution's amendment procedures could themselves be amended.

Therefore, rather than deferring to what the law currently says, it's our job as ethicists, and simply as citizens, to figure out what the law *should* say. That doesn't mean we don't have some moral obligation to obey current law, or that law has absolutely no moral standing. It simply means that we shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking legality equals morality. Good law tracks morality, not necessarily the other way around.

CHAPTER 5: THE FOUR DOMINANT ETHICAL THEORIES

Four theories dominate contemporary philosophical ethics: Kantianism, Consequentialism (of which Utilitarianism is the most popular version), Virtue Ethics and Feminist Care Ethics. Each is supported by a rich literature filled with intricate nuance. What we'll cover below is only a bird's eye view of each, with abbreviated versions of their respective supporting arguments.

Philosophers disagree over which theory enjoys the strongest logical support. But as we'll see, each promotes a basic component of human morality virtually anyone can appreciate and take seriously, regardless of their culture or religion. Those basic moral components and their associated theories are respect (Kantianism), outcomes (Consequentialism/Utilitarianism), character (Virtue Ethics), and relationships (Feminist Care Ethics).

KANTIANISM

He's been dead for 200 years, but philosophers remain in awe of the brilliance of German philosopher Immanuel Kant. With lasting influence in all four corners of philosophy (logic, epistemology,

metaphysics and ethics), his impact on ethics is perhaps most profound.

Kant argued that what gives persons intrinsic, infinite value is their ability to reason. The capacity for higher reason facilitates most everything we do, distinguishes us from nonhuman animals, and gives us the freedom to live lives that are genuinely our own. Like no other creature, human beings can reflect on their personality, character, and lives, decide to change them, form a plan, and take steps to make their vision reality. It's our capacity of reason that enables this unique freedom or "autonomy."

Further, without reason we couldn't properly *value* anything. That is, we couldn't decide which things are more or less important without considering whether, how, and to what extent they align with our goals and commitments. And all of that involves abstract thought—aka reasoning. So since valuing requires reasoning, if we value anything at all, we ought to value reason itself. Kant argued that properly valuing reason entails following two rules, which form the heart of Kantian Ethics. Those two rules are:

1. *Only do things you could rationally endorse everyone else doing in similar circumstances.*
2. *Always treat others with respect, and never as mere tools.*

The first rule, sometimes called the first formulation of the “Categorical Imperative” (a fancy term that simply means a rule you should always follow, regardless of your immediate aims), precludes lying, stealing, murdering and the like, for those are actions you couldn’t endorse everyone else doing in relevantly similar circumstances. This is because if *everyone* lied, stole or murdered, we wouldn’t gain anything by doing those things ourselves.

For example, imagine a world in which people *always* lied when it was to their advantage. What would happen? Lots of things, but at root, if people always lied, the social convention of trust, which is based on the expectation that people generally tell the truth, would dissolve. This would mean no one would ever take anyone at their word, and therefore there would be no benefit to lying. If I skipped work to go to a ballgame, then tried to convince my boss that I was out sick, she wouldn’t believe me if everyone *always* lied. If I spent my family’s grocery money on baseball cards, then tried to convince them I lost it in a robbery, they wouldn’t believe me if everyone *always* lied. Lying may be personally beneficial when it is rare. But if people were to do it *all* the time, it would be pretty useless.

You might ask, what if people only lied under extreme circumstances? Couldn’t we universalize lying when, say, there’s an axe murderer at the door trying to get in? Actually, no! If everyone always lied when axe murderers were at their door, well, axe murderers wouldn’t believe us when we tried to trick them. “Sorry, Mr. Axe

Murderer—nobody’s home.” “I know better than that!” <*Bursts through door with axe*> Kant himself realized as much, and maintained that the best an ethical person could do in such a situation is lock their door and remain silent. Remember: the question isn’t what we’d personally be willing to tolerate or what we’d like to do. It’s whether universalizing an action would undermine the advantage we’re tempted to seek (such as getting away with skipping work, or avoiding the murderer’s axe).

Theft is similarly non-universalizable. Imagine a world in which people always stole when it was to their advantage. Lots of bad things would result, but at root the social convention of property would dissolve, and anything I happened to possess would be at constant risk of being taken. If the tools I use to accomplish my goals were constantly being taken—such as my clothes, my laptop and my car—living a productive, meaningful life would be very difficult, if not impossible. I’d spend all my time attempting to re-secure my stuff, with little time left for thinking, writing, loving, attending UT football games and the like. Apart from being personally frustrating, this would make a vibrant economy impossible, for if retailers weren’t paid for their inventory, and producers weren’t paid for their goods, both would quickly go out of business. Theft is therefore something we can’t universalize, for in a world in which everyone always steals, whatever we’re able to steal would quickly be stolen, making our original theft quite useless. And with no economy, there wouldn’t be much to steal anyway.

As we can see, when considering whether something is consistent with Kantian Ethics, the first thing you should ask yourself is, *Would universalizing this action somehow undermine its benefits?* (Do this for murdering and downloading pirated movies on your own now. What answer did you reach? Why?) If universalizing an action would undermine the benefit you currently seek, Kant would say you shouldn't do it—it's unethical. If universalizing the action wouldn't undermine the benefit you currently seek, you're not cleared just yet. You still need to test it according to the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, and ask a second question: *Does this action show all involved rational parties adequate respect?*

Kant's mandate that we show persons adequate respect and never treat them as mere tools is based on his emphasis on our rationality. It's completely fine to treat a hammer as something to use however we see fit without regard to its welfare, for a hammer can't think, decide, or carry out a life plan. As an inanimate object, a hammer has no interests, and is only instrumentally valuable—valuable only insofar as it can do something for us.

The carpenter who swings that hammer, on the other hand, can indeed think, decide, and carry out a life plan. She is a rational autonomous agent, and has many interests, with many goals and aspirations. The same is true for you and me. As creatures with complex interests and plans, we desire and expect that others will honor them, and not interfere with them without good reason. It is

therefore incumbent upon us to treat one another not as simple objects, valuable only insofar as we can provide some benefit—but as fellow reasoners with intrinsic worth.

What exactly this entails has been interpreted differently by different philosophers. Some Kantians argue that treating others with respect mainly entails refraining from doing them harm. However, other Kantians argue that treating person with respect requires actively helping them when in need and looking out for their best interests.

In the Business Ethics literature, for example, some argue that Kantian respect for persons simply involves being up front with employees about working conditions and ensuring that they freely agree to their employment contracts. This would mean that if a job involved swimming in a cage with live sharks, an employer would need to ensure applicants and employees were aware of the danger, but needn't do anything to mitigate it.

Others argue that fully respecting employees requires providing a living wage, a safe working environment, and reasonably interesting work, or at least not *mind-numbing* work. This would mean shark swimmers should not only be informed of the danger, but provided with safety equipment, and enough pay to cover basic housing, nutrition and health care. (Shark swimmers are likely to need health care!) Which of these interpretations of this second component of Kantian Ethics is most convincing I leave to you to decide for yourself. Which seems to best show rational agents adequate respect? Why?

CONSEQUENTIALISM/UTILITARIANISM

While Kantianism mandates that we never lie or steal, Consequentialism actually *requires* that we lie and steal when doing so would bring about the best future overall. According to Consequentialist ethical theory, a person's actions aren't judged based on whether they show others proper respect or are consistent with a universalizability test, but instead according to the *consequences* they produce.

Utilitarianism, famously popularized by 18th and 19th century English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill, is the most popular breed of Consequentialism. Utilitarians argue that we have a moral mandate to maximize net pleasure, and should choose actions based on their likelihood of doing so. This is because pleasure is the only thing valued for its own sake, and there's no reason to think any particular creature's pursuit of pleasure is any more important than the next's. Maximizing it is therefore a way to treat all creatures with equal respect—everyone's pleasure and pain counts the same in the “Utilitarian calculus.”

Let's first consider the Utilitarian premise that pleasure is the *only* thing valued for its own sake. A Utilitarian would argue that you no doubt value your toothbrush, but only *instrumentally*—only because it enables some valued result. Namely, your toothbrush keeps your teeth healthy—so it's healthy teeth that you really value, not your toothbrush, right? Actually, a Utilitarian would argue that you don't

value your teeth for their own sake either—you value them for their ability to help you consume food (or maybe insofar as healthy teeth are integral to your attractiveness, but in any case not for their own sake). Further, not even food is valuable for its own sake! We value our food for the pleasure its consumption produces, and for the nutrition it provides, which facilitates good health, enabling us to maintain a pleasurable state, and otherwise seek out pleasure in ways only healthy people can. So it's the direct experience of *pleasure* that you value at root—not the food, or your ability to chew it, or the cleanliness of your teeth, and definitely not your toothbrush.

This is true for everything, or so Utilitarians argue. Our cell phones, our Facebook accounts, our healthy bodies—even *our loved ones*—are all valued for the pleasure they ultimately facilitate, and not for their own sake. Go ahead—run this thought experiment on the things *you* value. Can you think of something you value for its own sake, and not for the pleasure it ultimately makes possible?

Assuming that this line of reasoning works, Utilitarians go on to argue that humans are equal in that we all seek to attain pleasure and avoid pain. We may do this in our own way—some by becoming stock brokers, accountants and philosophers, others by becoming priests, mothers and race car drivers. But whatever our path, pleasure is what we're after.

Given that we share that basic aim, there's no reason to think that any one person's pursuit of pleasure is more important than the next's.

Therefore the morally right course of action is the one that brings about the most pleasure *overall*. Utilitarianism can thus be summarized:

1. *Do whatever will maximize overall pleasure.*

It's important to notice that the mandate isn't to maximize *your personal* pleasure. Utilitarianism isn't an excuse to do whatever's best for you regardless of the impact on others—it isn't selfish egoism. In fact, devout Utilitarians will often sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of others when doing so will bring about more pleasure overall.

For example, if I'm a Utilitarian with a Snickers bar, and sharing it with you will bring about more pleasure overall than eating it myself, I have a moral obligation to do so. I might enjoy 4 units of pleasure if I eat it alone, and only 3 units of pleasure if I share. But if sharing will bring you more than 1 unit of pleasure, that will produce greater than 4 units total, which trumps the 4 units I'd enjoy if I kept it to myself.

This example seems pretty easy. But how can we tell for sure which action will produce the most net pleasure? After all, maybe the Snickers bar went bad, and instead of just making me sick, sharing it makes you sick too! Also, judgments about the pleasure or pain others experience are necessarily uncertain, for we can't "get inside" anyone else's head and experience the world from their perspective. Based on your expression I may *think* that you enjoy the Snickers bar as much as I do. But maybe 4 units of joy on your scale is only 0.4 units of joy

on my scale—in which case maximizing overall pleasure would have required eating it all myself.

These are serious worries with which Utilitarians continue to grapple. But they don't fully undercut the credibility or usefulness of the theory. We can and do make rough utility judgments with the information we have available. Anytime we're presented with an ethical dilemma Utilitarianism says we should articulate our options, list everyone potentially affected, consider the potential effects on each according to the candidate actions, calculate the pleasure each is likely to produce, and take whichever path will maximize net pleasure. For example, consider the following dilemma:

Imagine you're a high school student (not so hard to image if you're a high school ethics bowler!) on your way to English class, when you pass an apparent stab victim. He is bleeding badly, no one is stopping to help, and you know first aid. You also know your English teacher is giving a quiz at the beginning of next period, and that she doesn't allow make-ups under any circumstances. What should you do?

In deciding, first recognize that you have at least two options—go on to class or stop and help—with at least three parties potentially impacted: you, the stab victim, and the stab victim's mother. There are of course other options; you could apply a quick tourniquet, dial 9-11, and run to class. And there are of course other parties potentially affected, including the stab victim's cousins, the student population,

and your English teacher, to name but three. We're just simplifying the equation to illustrate the method.

To further simplify things we'll quantify each person's pleasure/pain on a 20-point scale from -10 to +10. Let -10 represent unbearable, excruciating, long-lasting pain, +10 represent wonderful, euphoric, long-lasting pleasure, and 0 represent complete indifference—with everything in between representing some point on that continuum.

Option One: *go on to class*. If you go on to class, you'll take the quiz, do well if you studied, and avoid bloodying your clothes. So from your perspective, let's say that's +1. For the stab victim, they're going to continue to bleed, risk brain injury and death, and at the very least suffer compounded long-term psychological damage—not only were they *stabbed at school*, but dozens of their classmates and teachers refused to help them! So from their perspective, given the uncertainty of how bad off they'll be, let's call that a -7. For the stab victim's mother, if you don't stop, she may lose a child, which I'm told is one of the most devastating things that can happen to a person. And at the very least, she'll be similarly distraught that no stopped to aid her baby sooner. So let's call that a -7 as well, for a total of -13 (your 1 minus 7 minus 7 more).

Option Two: *stop and help*. If you stop, you'll miss the quiz and ruin your favorite shirt, but the satisfaction you'll gain from saving a life will likely outweigh those comparatively trivial inconveniences.

(Notice that we're running mini calculations for each party—the pain of a missed quiz versus the satisfaction of saving a life.) So from your perspective, let's call that a +5. For the stab victim, you'll at the very least partially restore their faith in mankind, prevent lasting damage from extreme blood loss, and might even save their life. However, they still had a really bad day...they still got *stabbed at school*... So their overall pleasure can't be too high, which we'll say is at -4. Last, the stab victim's mother will still be upset her baby was stabbed, but she'll be eternally grateful that someone cared enough to save him, so we'll assign that a -4 as well, for a total of -3 (your 5 minus 4 minus 4 more).

Option:	#1: <u>Go to Class</u>	#2: <u>Stop & Help</u>
You	1	5
Stab Victim	-7	-4
<u>Stab Victim's Mom</u>	-7	-4
Net Pleasure	-13	-3

According to our assumptions, which are of course uncertain and rough, it looks like Utilitarianism would recommend that you stop and help the stab victim, for doing so would bring about three negative units of net pleasure, as opposed to thirteen negative units. Ideally students would leave their shanks at home and no one would get

stabbed at all. But if it's happened and these are your options, the Utilitarian calculus says the ethical thing to do is stop and help.

I hope that's what seemed right according to your common sense moral judgment all along! Just like torturing babies for fun is clearly unethical, saving a human life is clearly more important than an outfit or grade.

However, notice that the math would have come out differently if the person considering stopping wasn't you, but was instead an incredibly selfish jerk. If someone cared a great deal about clothes and grades, and very little about human life, that might be enough for the scales to tip in the other direction, and for the Utilitarian calculus to recommend they go on to class instead. However, once we widen the scope of consideration, and take into account the impact in terms of multiplied fear and anxiety a murdered peer would have on the student population, it is very unlikely that one person's fixation on GPA and fashion could overcome the negative impact on all others—no matter how big a jerk they happen to be.

Last, you may have noticed that the above process would prove itself tedious and impractical if it had to be done every time we were presented with a moral dilemma. *“Wait just one second, stab victim. Let me break out my calculator and decide whether I should stop and help you...”* But luckily there are many rules of thumb we can follow in a pinch that tend to maximize net pleasure, such as tell the truth, honor others' property, and help those in need when doing so will cause only

minor inconvenience. However, even if Utilitarianism can be made practical, some have complained that the Consequentialist approach to ethics neglects an essential component of being a moral creature. And that essential component concerns the obligations we owe our loved ones.

FEMINIST CARE ETHICS

Care Ethics was developed as a response to what self-defined feminist philosophers considered the cold, calculating “malestream” approach to morality. Care Ethicists argue that our relational ties to family and friends are of obvious moral importance—it’s just an irrefutable truth about the human experience that *relationships matter*, and any ethical theory that doesn’t take relationships very seriously (for example, *all the rest*) is eternally flawed.

Note that its title doesn’t mean the theory somehow only applies to women. In fact, as a very manly man, I can say Feminist Care Ethics is quite consistent with a masculine perspective. After all, prioritizing the interests of his family is the quintessential mark of the mature manly male (insert caveman grunt—ugh, ugh!).

A Utilitarian might prioritize the interests of his mother because doing so maximizes net pleasure. But while a Care Ethicist might endorse the disposition, they would reject the *reason* behind it. “*You*

should prioritize the interests of your mother because she's your mother, not because doing so happens to bring about more pleasure than doing otherwise," they'd say.

Apart from our relationships just seeming intuitively important, Care Ethicists argue for the primacy of relational considerations because we're fundamentally interdependent creatures. Though we like to entertain the fantasy that we're independent islands, nobody comes into this world, is successfully reared, flourishes or even *survives* without the help and cooperation of *lots* of other persons. Even mail-order work-from-home hermits depend on the cooperation of the UPS delivery man to bring them stuff from Amazon, which is produced in an economy involving thousands—all working and living and creating based on knowledge learned from previous generations, and from one another.

Even *language itself* is socially determined. You would know very, very little without language, which lots and lots of other people collectively created and shared with you. So since we're all in this together, Care Ethicists argue, to the extent that we're emotionally attached and indebted to a person, their concerns should have special priority in our ethical decisions.

To see the clear contrast with Utilitarianism in particular, imagine that aliens have abducted you, your mother the corporate lawyer, and a groundbreaking cancer researcher. Demented as aliens are, they force you to choose who among you shall live: your mother

the attorney or the cancer researcher. From the Utilitarian perspective, unless your mom does something socially beneficial on the side, you should probably pick her to die and the researcher to live. There's at least a chance they'll go on to heal lots of cancer patients and produce lots of pleasure (or at least alleviate lots of pain). But your mom, *the corporate lawyer*, probably actually maximizes net *pain* with her evil lawyering trickery! (Note: lawyers are the descendants of mercenary reasoners called "sophists," who were the ancient enemies of philosophers.)

But Care Ethicists would object that your *relationship* with your mother should override any potential benefits saving the researcher might bring about. Beyond the fact that she brought you into the world, nurtured you, and continues to give you unconditional love—beyond simply *owing* her for all this—your bond is granted special moral status for its own sake, and should be the determining factor in deciding—despite her poor choice of profession. (I'm kidding. Not really...)

VIRTUE ETHICS

So we've talked about only doing stuff we can universalize, treating persons with respect, maximizing net pleasure, and prioritizing the interests of our loved ones. It's finally time to discuss a venerated ethical theory that focuses on the root of who we are—on our

character.

We're all familiar with the virtues of honesty, courage, humility, thrift and the like. As well as the vices of sloth, greed, gluttony, cowardice, and vanity. Virtue Ethicists argue that we should do our best to internalize and practice the former and avoid the latter—that ethics is all about developing good character. Why should we care about character? *Because doing so will allow us to lead a good life.*

This is the message ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle attempts to convey to his son, Nicomachus, in the classic *Nicomachean Ethics*, transcribed from lectures given in Athens over two millennia ago. Cowardly, gluttonous, lazy people are usually dissatisfied with themselves. They're not leading good human lives—not living up to the amazing potential each and every one of us possesses. They know it, everyone else knows it, and their experience as a person is simply less fulfilling than it could be.

On the other hand, brave, ambitious people who practice all things in moderation tend to be happier. They lead more satisfying existences more in line with what humans are capable of becoming. They push the boundaries of what they're personally capable of accomplishing, and look back on their lives with a smile, rather than regret. *“If you want to live a good life,”* Virtue Ethicists say, *“then you should adhere to the time tested virtues and avoid the time tested vices.”*

Do that, or simply ask yourself how a moral exemplar (or role

model) would handle a given situation, and follow their lead. For example, many Christian Virtue Ethicists model their life after the life of Jesus, and when presented with any dilemma simply ask themselves, “What would Jesus do?”

However, when it’s unclear what your exemplar would do, and you’re simply attempting to follow the virtues and avoid the vices, knowing which to apply and to what degree is a matter of good judgment. This is also true when virtues apparently recommend conflicting actions. Maybe being brave would require running into a burning building to search for survivors, but maybe being patient would require waiting for the fire department.

As a result, Virtue Ethics can sometimes seem imprecise. This is one reason *wisdom* is perhaps the most important virtue, because being wise allows a person to recognize the fine line between bravery and recklessness, thrift and miserliness, confidence and arrogance—when to be brave, and when to be patient.

Notice that the argument underlying virtue ethics seems selfish. “Ethics is about acting virtuously, and acting virtuously is important because it will enable you to live a better life, which will make you a happier, more satisfied, more complete person,” Virtue Ethicists say. This justifying argument isn’t necessarily bad, but it is a distinguishing feature of the theory, since the others don’t explicitly claim to benefit us personally, but instead give us other-regarding—or in the case of Kant, reason-regarding—reasons for their ultimate support.

CHAPTER 6: ALL-THINGS-CONSIDERED

Though some philosophers are what we might call *exclusive* Kantians, Utilitarians, Care Ethicists or Virtue Ethicists, the majority don't prioritize one to the detriment of the others. That is, few ethicists defer exclusively to a single theory in every case. This is because all four seem to make good points, each expressing some ethical maxim already belonging to common sense: Kantianism—*we should treat persons with respect*; Consequentialism/Utilitarianism—*we should promote good consequences*; Feminist Care Ethics—*those close to us deserve special priority*; Virtue Ethics—*it's better to have good character than bad character*.

But while it may be clear that all four promote legitimate moral norms, it's often unclear which should guide our action when they conflict. As we saw with the kidnapping aliens example above, Utilitarianism and Care Ethics sometimes produce incompatible recommendations. *If these demented aliens force me to choose, should I follow Utilitarianism and sacrifice my mom? Or Care Ethics and sacrifice the cancer researcher?*

One resolution promoted by 20th century American philosopher Betsy Postow recommends that we weigh the logical force of conflicting recommendations according to how powerfully each respective theory recommends a particular action, producing an "All-Things-

Considered” moral judgment.

Postow argued that when presented with a moral dilemma, we should first identify which sorts of considerations are at play—respecting persons, promoting good consequences, honoring key relationships, developing good character, or some mix. Once we’re clear on which theories are relevant (maybe the interests of many rational agents are at stake, so Kantianism would have a lot to say) and which are irrelevant (maybe we’re dealing with strangers only, so Care Ethics might have little to say), it’s a matter of weighing the importance of each consideration within its own realm against the importance of the other considerations within their realms. That is, a really strong Kantian consideration against an action would override a really weak Utilitarian consideration for the same action, and vice versa.

For example, were I to see one of my students drowning in my neighbor’s pond, I would have some obligation to respect my neighbor’s property rights and not trespass on her lawn. This is a Kantian consideration that has some force. After all, fidelity to the concept of private property is necessary for a functioning economy, which produces necessary goods and services we might otherwise have to do without. Therefore Kant would say since I can’t universalize neglecting property boundaries, I ought not neglect them myself. However, when we consider other morally relevant factors at play, the property claim in this Kantian argument seems comparatively weak.

From the Utilitarian perspective, I assume drowning is a very

unpleasurable experience, not to mention the negative impact my student's death would have on her friends and family. If I trespass on my neighbor's lawn just this one time her grass won't be damaged too terribly much, and I suspect she'll actually thank me for the rescue, for it might prevent a lawsuit, as well as a devaluation of her property value.

Further, though I may not know her very well, I have *some* relationship with all my students, and so long as saving her wouldn't detract from more pressing obligations to closer loved ones, that's a Care Ethics reason in favor of rescue.

Last, helping under these circumstances seems the sort of thing a wise, brave, virtuous person would do. And so Virtue Ethics would likely endorse rescuing her as well, though I must say applying that theory to this case isn't all that helpful. (Maybe the virtue of decisiveness would simply encourage me to spring into action as soon as possible.)

And so we have a relatively weak Kantian prohibition on trespassing juxtaposed against a fairly strong Utilitarian argument in favor of rescuing, as well as additional weak support in favor of rescuing from both Feminist Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics. We might attempt to quantify the force of these recommendations on a -10 to +10 scale, similar to our Utilitarian calculus. -10 would correspond to the strongest possible prohibition, +10 would correspond to the strongest possible obligation, and 0 would mean that particular theory doesn't

seem to apply at all. For the case at hand, our calculations might look like this:

Rescue Drowning Student?

Kantianism: weak No (-2)

Utilitarianism: strong Yes (7)

Feminist Care Ethics: weak Yes (1)

Virtue Ethics: weak Yes (1)

Result: strong Yes (7)

It looks like I'd have an All-Things-Considered obligation to rescue the drowning student of a force of 7, which is pretty strong on our scale. Of course, things could get complicated if the details changed. What if I'd have to dodge speeding traffic to save the student? Or what if when I arrive I find that *two* students are drowning rather than one, and I only have time and energy to save one? Or what if I find that instead of a student, the person drowning is a clone of Hitler!

These sorts of complex cases can and do happen. Well, nobody has to decide whether to save drowning Hitler clones... But morally relevant factors do sometimes pull in opposite directions, and the four dominant ethical theories do sometimes provide conflicting recommendations. However, Postow's approach gives us a way to work through these complexities, and hopefully arrive at decisions that are the best they can be, all things considered.

CHAPTER 7: ARGUMENT BY ANALOGY

One common and effective form of moral argumentation is argument by analogy. The underlying principle supporting argument by analogy is that we should be consistent in our moral judgments (which we'll discuss further next chapter), and it involves finding an issue or situation where our moral intuitions are consistent and clear, and making a case that another issue or situation that is relevantly similar should be handled in a similar fashion. Below are two famous examples, followed by a section on how to analyze arguments by analogy.

SINGER'S DROWNING CHILD

Imagine you're walking down the street and see a small child drowning in a shallow pool. No one else is around, and if you don't jump in and save them they'll surely drown. You happen to be wearing a new pair of expensive shoes, and if you jump in, they'll be ruined. However, it seems clear and uncontroversial that the child's life far outweighs the value of your shoes, and so most everyone would agree that the right thing to do is jump in and save the child—new shoes be darned.

Well, English philosopher Peter Singer argues that if you agree

that we'd all have a moral obligation to save the child in the above scenario, you should also agree that we all have a moral obligation to donate money to certain charities. Why? Thousands of children die every day from inexpensively treatable diseases such as diarrhea. Therefore, the next time we're in the market for a new pair of shoes, an iPod, an Xbox or whatever, we should instead donate that money to an organization like [Oxfam](#) who can then use it to save the actual life of an actual child.

That's an argument by analogy. Singer says that if you agree with this moral assessment over here (a child's life is more important than new shoes when they're drowning in front of you), you should apply similar reasoning and reach a similar conclusion over here (a child's life is more important than new shoes when they're dying of an inexpensively treatable disease thousands of miles away).

Never mind that the urgency and vibrancy of a child drowning right in front of you would be more psychologically compelling and harder to ignore than a child dying of diarrhea on the other side of the planet. The question is what we morally ought to do, not what we're psychologically apt to do, and given that these two cases seem relevantly similar, you ought to apply similar logic and reach similar conclusions.

JARVIS-THOMPSON'S VIOLINIST

Imagine that you go to sleep tonight per usual, but when you awake find yourself surrounded by a small group of people, and apparently connected to another person via a series of tubes. Noticing that you're awake, the group leader asks you to relax, and explains that they are members of the Society for Music Lovers, and the gentleman to which you are connected is a famous violinist—one of the world's greatest violinists, in fact. He explains that the violinist has a rare disease, and as it happens you possess a very rare blood type which he needs circulating through his veins to survive. If you disconnect from the tubes connecting your bodies, the violinist will surely die.

The question is, do you think you would have a moral obligation to remain connected to the violinist? You would probably have to quit the basketball team and/or cheerleading, and you'd likely find prom a little awkward with a grown musician strapped to your back. But remember, all you did was go to bed per usual. It's the Society for Music Lovers who has hijacked your body and connected you in this way without your consent. Does the fact that the connection was made without your consent mean disconnecting is morally permissible, even though it means the violinist will die?

American philosopher Judith Jarvis-Thompson famously argued that you would have no such obligation to remain connected, and that similar reasoning makes it clear that women who become pregnant as the result of rape have no obligation to maintain their pregnancy. Do

you see the similarities between the cases?

In both the party providing life-support did not consent to the relationship, in both some third party brought the two together (the Society for Music Lovers in the first case and the rapist in the second), and in both the dependent party will die if the relationship is terminated.

HOW TO ANALYZE ARGUMENTS BY ANALOGY

One way to analyze an argument by analogy is to look for relevant differences between the cases being compared. For example, consider one potential difference between the examples in Singer's argument.

While we can know firsthand that the child will be saved if we jump in the water to save them, we may wonder how much of our shoe money will go to administrative costs and how much will actually purchase medicine if we donate it to Oxfam. As it turns out, Oxfam has been judged by independent observers to be an exceptionally efficient charity. But can you think of other dissimilarities between the cases that might weaken the connection and undermine Singer's conclusion?

What about Jarvis-Thompson's argument? One dissimilarity is that the famous violinist has presumably already lived a good portion of his life. We might therefore conclude that disconnecting and killing him wouldn't be quite as tragic as an abortion, which would weaken

her conclusion.

Or arguing in the other direction, one might point out that the violinist is presumably a fully rational adult, possessing all the features of personhood that we seem to consider valuable—consciousness, the ability to feel pleasure and pain, the ability to engage in relationships, higher-order rationality—features that, depending on the stage of pregnancy, may not also be true in that case. And so if we think it would be morally permissible to disconnect from the violinist, it may be even easier to justify an abortion in cases of rape.

Of course, abortion is far too complex an issue to conclude anything definitive after a few short paragraphs, and even how the above considerations would balance one another out can't be decided until we more closely examine the cases. Can you think of any more differences between the violinist scenario and the pregnancy that's the result of rape? If so, do the differences have bearing on Jarvis-Thompson's conclusion?

So that's how we construct and evaluate arguments by analogy. To the extent that scenarios are relevantly similar, we should use similar moral reasoning to govern them. Such arguments are powerful and useful because we're implicitly committed to the values of fairness and consistency—of treating like cases alike.

CHAPTER 8: MORAL INTUITIONS & COHERENCE

As you're finding, philosophers are a cerebral bunch. They're comfortable immersed in complex argumentation, enjoy entertaining outlandish thought experiments, and relish complex *what ifs*. If you're familiar with Star Trek, you might associate philosophers with Vulcans. And if you're not familiar with Star Trek, make a point to familiarize yourself—it's awesome.

Philosophers in most cases warn against following our *feelings* or *emotion* when attempting to answer the sort of questions they tackle, because bias and overreaction lead us astray. As they sometimes say, "the heart clouds the mind."

THE VALUE OF OUR MORAL INTUITIONS

That said, our gut does play a respected role in philosophical ethics. When it comes to our baseline, fundamental, no doubt moral convictions, like *slavery is wrong*, *killing innocents is usually wrong*, and *torture is usually wrong*, we shouldn't allow an elaborate philosophical theory to sway our certainty. If an ethical theory tells us slavery is OK, that's reason to reject or revise the theory, or at least

admit its limitations—not reason to declare slavery morally acceptable.

This is because we need some initial input to get all this theorizing off the ground. In fact, remember the positive argument for why ethics isn't ice cream? I didn't use a sophisticated explanation to convince you moral subjectivism is fatally flawed. I simply cited the unsavory implication that endorsing subjectivism prevents us from criticizing baby torturers. I simply appealed to your moral intuitions, and you could *directly see* that subjectivism was flawed.

While philosophers are best known for using their minds, we actually need our hearts and minds to work together. We need our direct experience as creatures with moral sentiments to mesh with any theory we use to guide us when our moral vision might be less clear. Notice that Kantianism, Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics and Feminist Care Ethics are all intimately tied to some moral axiom we seem to take for granted as obviously true. Upon reflection, we simply *know* or can directly see or feel that autonomy, consequences, character and relationships are morally relevant concepts. This seems to be ingrained in our experience as persons—something that after a little practice and experience in the world we're able to draw upon via a sense that can be described as intuition.

Our moral intuitions are therefore not simply a luxury for moral reasoners—they're a necessity. However, that certainly doesn't mean we blindly defer to our gut feelings. Rather, consulting our moral sense is an integral part of a process, one goal of which is coherence.

THE VALUE OF COHERENCE

One ultimate goal of philosophical ethics is to hold a consistent set of moral beliefs that can be supported with sound argumentation. Why? Because “*we should treat like cases alike*” seems to be one of those baseline, fundamental rules of ethics that we can directly experience as true, and we’re more confident that our views really make sense after reflecting and considering reasons for and against them.

With that in mind, our gut-level moral judgments need to be put in conversation with candidate ethical theories and principles, and the entire process should be subjected to ongoing evaluation, articulation, examination, reevaluation and revision. That is, we shouldn’t use ethical theories to simply *rationalize our prejudices*, but rather to *improve our views*. One method for doing this was promoted by 20th century American political philosopher John Rawls, the goal of which is a state of “*reflective equilibrium*.”

For example, maybe a person starts out convinced that homosexuality, abortion, and promiscuous sex are all three definitely and in all cases morally wrong. But are these convictions logically consistent?

In deciding, the person might try to identify an abstract moral principle that can organize and make sense of all three judgments. Rawls would advise that they go back and forth between candidate principles and their “considered convictions,” attempting to achieve

some harmony between the two. Ultimately a person should be able to render all of his or her moral convictions logically consistent, but beginning with those that are most interesting or most compelling is an excellent strategy.

The point is that as a person goes back and forth between their convictions, searching for and testing different guiding principles, they may find that their baseline judgments aren't so certain after all. Maybe they conclude that homosexuality or some forms of abortion or promiscuous sex aren't as obviously immoral as they originally thought. Or maybe upon reflection they conclude that all three are even *more* immoral than they originally thought!

Whatever the case, coherence is a main aim, for anyone who fails to achieve it is subject to criticism on grounds that they're simply being illogical—a grave sin in the eyes of philosophers, scientists, and Vulcans.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

So that's ethics in a nutshell. Philosophers use their capacity for higher reason to answer moral questions rather than blindly following their feelings, the crowd, or tradition. They construct arguments, share them with others, and work together to cooperatively think through difficult moral questions. Many ethicists defer to their religious convictions in their personal lives, but many more find ways for their spiritual and philosophical reasoning to work together.

There are different ways in which “ought” and “should” are used, and ethicists typically use them in a prescriptive, rather than predictive, sense. There's a differences between what people are psychologically likely to do, and what they morally ought to do. And while good law tracks morality, morality and legality are separable, distinct concepts.

Four theories dominate contemporary philosophy—Kantianism, Consequentialism or Utilitarianism, Feminist Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics, each of which is grounded in a morally-relevant consideration most everyone takes for granted: respect, outcomes, relationships and character. When it comes to applying those theories and making concrete judgments in real cases, one strategy is to consider what each theory would have us do, and choose the option that enjoys the most “All-Things-Considered” support.

As we just saw, our intuitions play an important role in helping us decide which ethical theories are worthy of our respect, and in fact are necessary to do ethical reasoning at all. And while we shouldn't allow our raw emotions to control everything we think and do, we should pay close attention to our carefully considered moral judgments, and make sure our moral decisions don't contradict our fixed considered convictions. Any ethical theory that does conflict with our bedrock, reflective moral convictions probably needs revising.

Ok, that's more than enough reading about philosophical ethics. It's time you started *doing* philosophical ethics. If bowl season is underway, get ahold of the official case pool and start applying all you've learned. If the pool has yet to be released, get ahold of an old case pool and practice. And remember: doing philosophy is a cooperative, collaborative endeavor. No one has all the answers, and you're probably wrong about several things (I'm sure I am!). So be humble in your views, and eager to think through these tough issues with your peers. Oh, and be sure to have fun!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt". The letters are fluid and connected, with a long horizontal stroke at the end of the word.

APPENDIX

WHERE TO FIND ETHICS BOWL RULES AND PROCEDURES

The rules and procedures used by the annual National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB) are available at the official NHSEB site nhseb.unc.edu.

HOW TO FIND A BOWL

You can also find information on the various National Qualifying Event (NQE) bowls spread across America at the official NHSEB site nhseb.unc.edu. And for info on the bowl that I co-organize—the DC Area High School Ethics Bowl—visit our official site, www.EthicsBowl.org.

WHERE TO FIND SAMPLE ETHICS BOWL CASES

These can also be found at the official NHSEB site, nhseb.unc.edu.

FURTHER READING

[The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online](#)

Use the search function for concise but in-depth articles on most anything philosophy, including the four dominant ethical theories.

[James Rachels's The Elements of Moral Philosophy](#)

The classic introduction to ethics, used in undergraduate philosophy courses the world over. Used copies of earlier editions can be found for under \$5.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Whether you're a potential or actual bowl organizer, a coach, participant or volunteer, feel free to contact me directly with any questions about ethics, philosophy, ethics bowls or anything else at matt@mattdeaton.com or 865-323-9773.