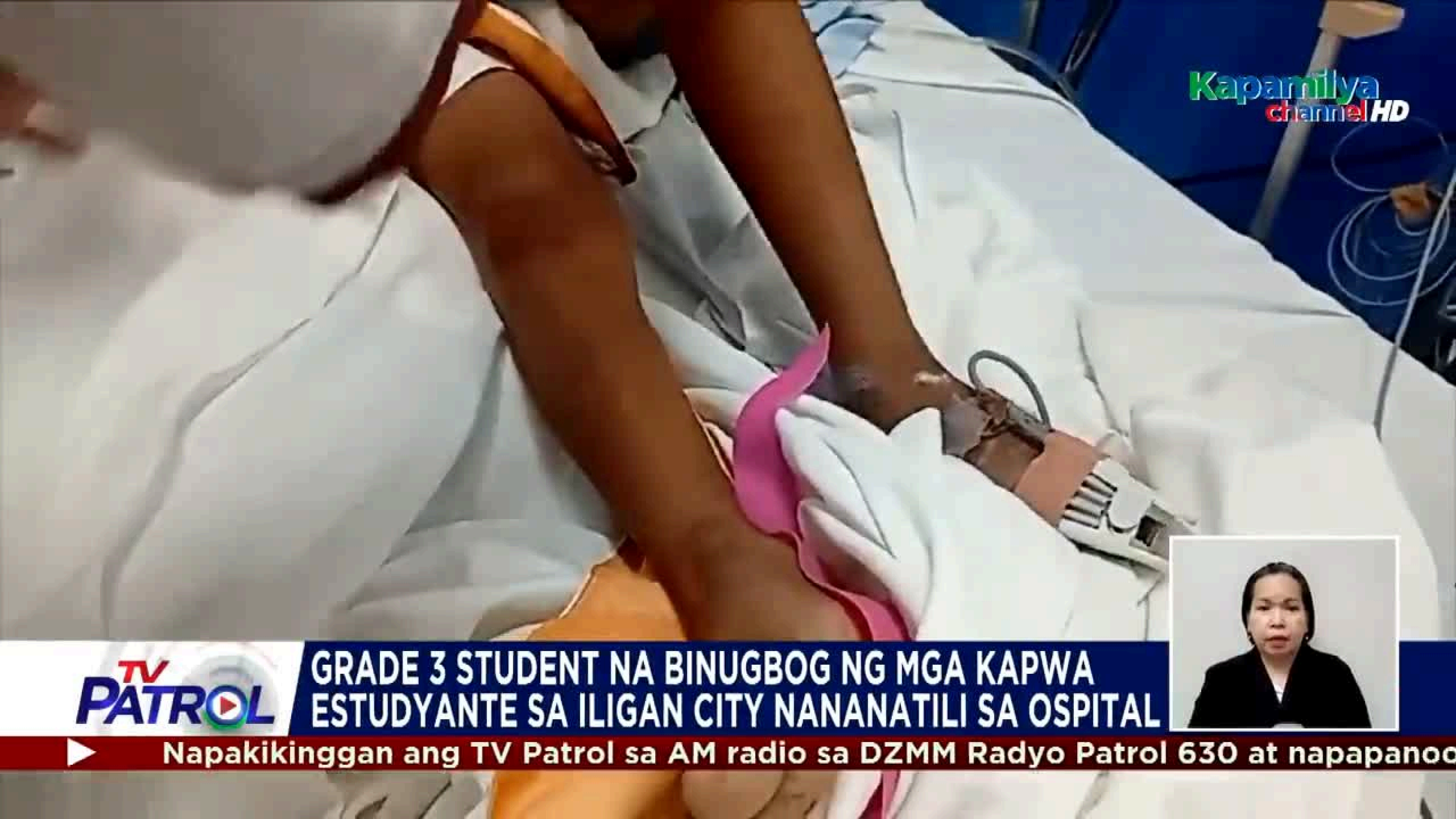
BASIC CONCEPTS IN ETHICS

Butch Cabaylo
Instructor

Intended Learning Outcomes

1. Define ethics and morality
2. Differentiate the various branches of ethics
3. Differentiate non-moral norms from moral ones
4. Justify one's stand on a case study involving a conflict between moral and non-moral norm
5. Evaluate the moral status of certain actions
6. Explain the roles of freedom and reason as fundamental foundations of morality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LIVE: Israel pounds Gaza City, kills at least 57 across Strip

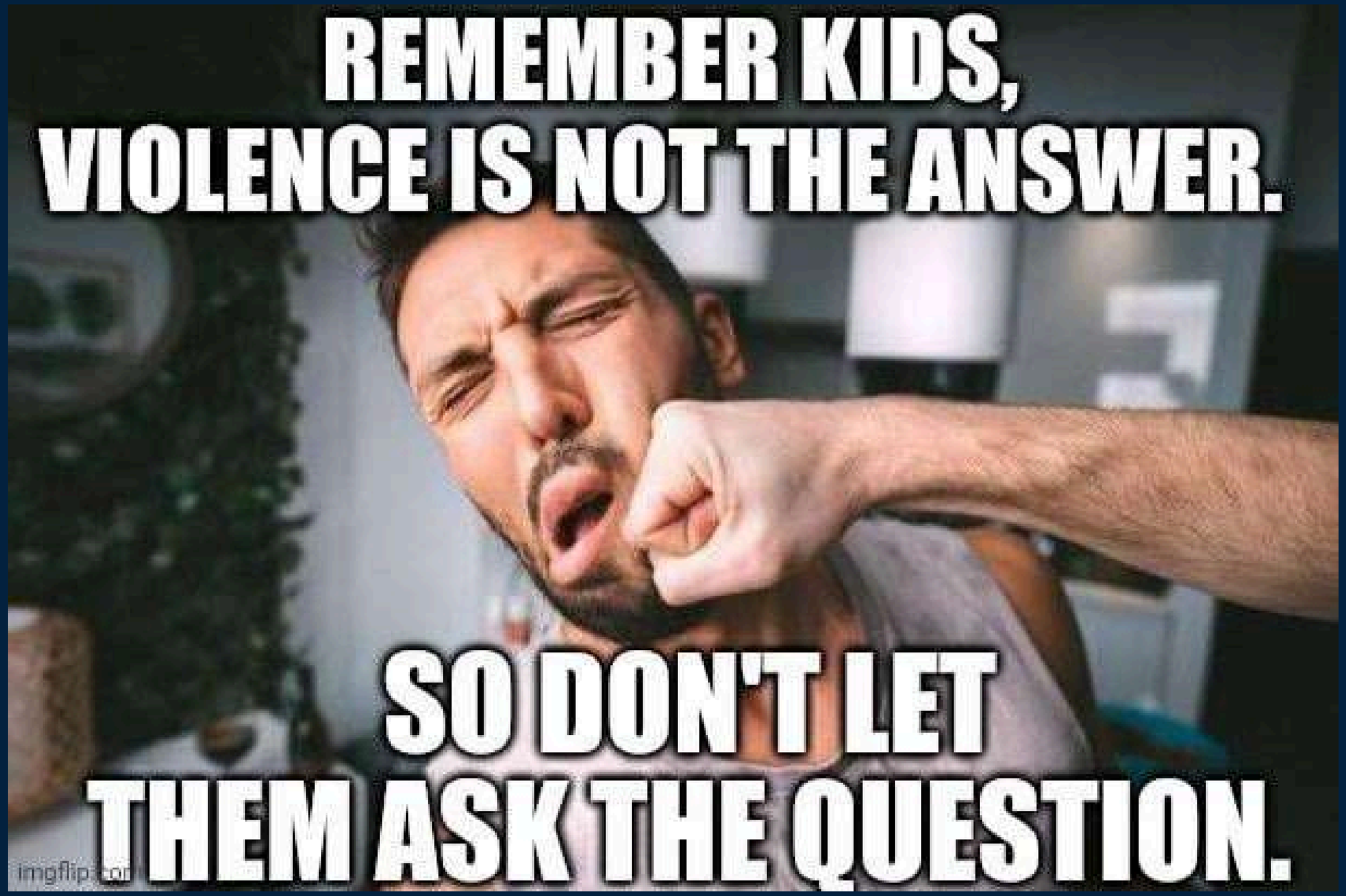
By **Edna Mohamed and Maziar Motamedi**
17 Aug 2025

- At least 57 people have been killed in Israeli attacks across Gaza since the early hours of this morning, including 38 starving people seeking aid.
- Hamas has slammed Israel's plan to seize Gaza City, calling talk of shelter provision and humanitarian aid "blatant deception".

Sexual violence in conflicts worldwide increased by 25% last year, UN says

The U.N. says sexual violence in conflicts worldwide increased by 25% last year, with the highest number of cases in the Central African Republic, Congo, Haiti, Somalia and South Sudan

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press
August 15, 2025, 6:20 AM


REMEMBER KIDS,
VIOLENCE IS NOT THE ANSWER.
SO DON'T LET
THEM ASK THE QUESTION.
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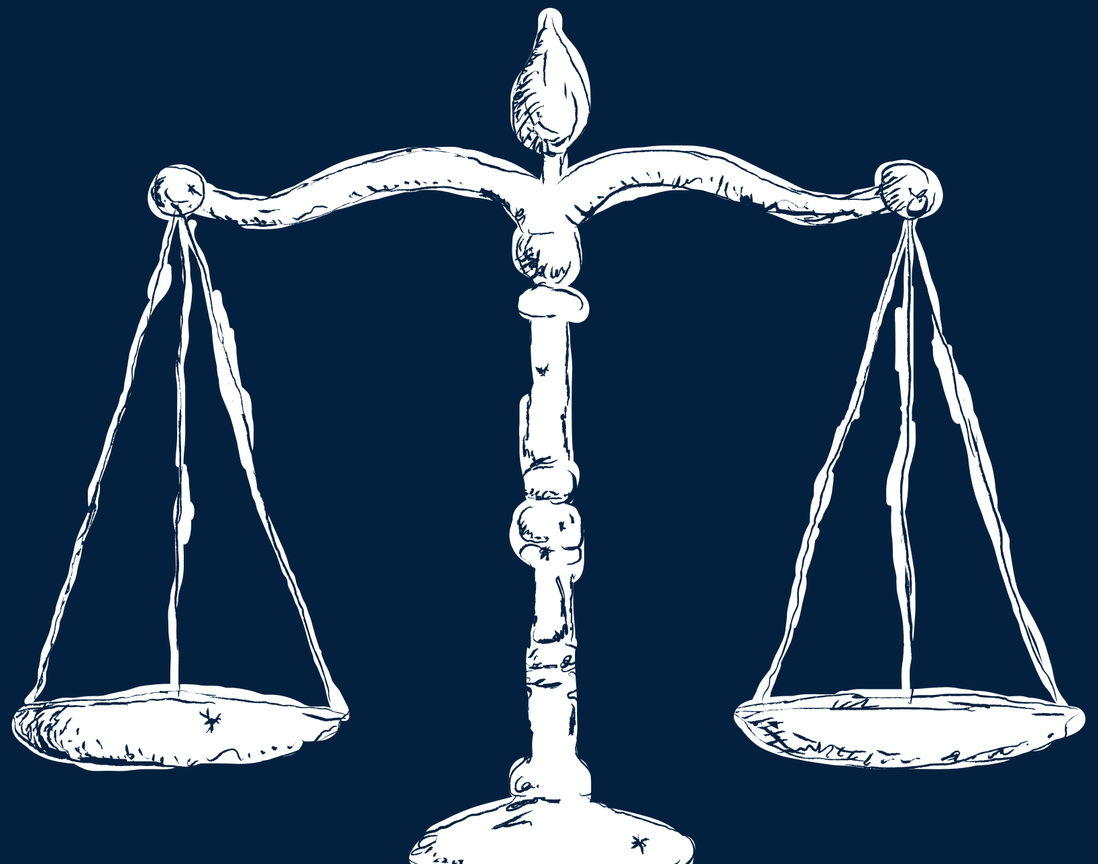
Why do we need RULES?

What is ETHICS?

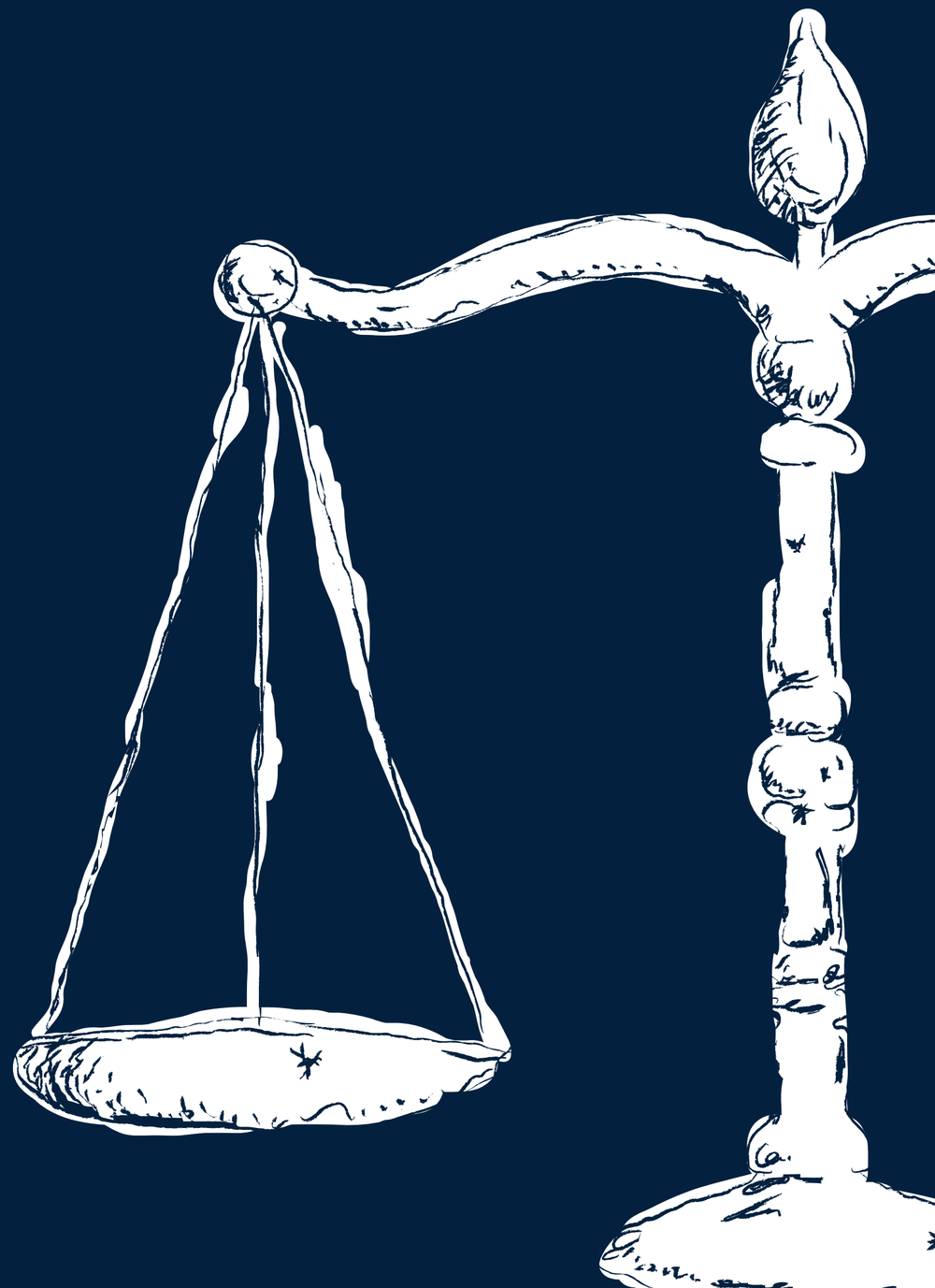


ETHICS

- The word "ethics" came from the Greek word '*ethos*', which translates as "character" or "*manners*"; it is also translated as
  - "characteristic or habitual ways of doing things" in some other references.

- Ethics is the branch of Philosophy that studies the morality of human actions.

- It is also called as **Moral Philosophy** and concerned with the rightness or wrongness of acts done by individuals and how they are considered right or wrong.



Morality

- refers to a ***person's or society's set of standards of what is right and wrong.***
- These are often instilled in childhood by family, friends, and other influences like the church or school.
- People tend to accept these standards unquestioningly and mechanically.

Ethics

- the discipline that examines these moral standards.
  - Thus, the science of morality.
- It involves reflecting on and questioning the ***soundness and reasonableness of the moral beliefs and practices*** that a person or society has.
- Ethics ***invites self-awareness and self-criticism, prompting individuals to question the moral standards*** they've simply acquired without critical inquiry.

Five Branches of

Philosophy

- Metaphysics
- Epistemology
- Logic
- Ethics
- Aesthetics

Philosophy

is the ***critical examination*** of beliefs, values, assumptions and worldviews using reason. To critically examine something is to put it *under rigorous and sustained scrutiny.*

It means among others to **identify reasons in support of the claim, evaluate whether those reasons are adequate to serve as support**, and whether the inference from the reasons (or premises) to the claim (or conclusion) is valid.

Philosophy

We have to adopt an attitude of

HEALTHY SKEPTICISM

with

Philosophy

we become

CRITICAL THINKERS

1. a critical thinker makes one likely to ***avoid many errors*** in which intellectual complacency is vulnerable.
2. critical thinking makes one ***more likely to find the truth*** than any other nonrational mechanisms.

“Moral philosophy is a ***morally risky endeavor.***”

Jason Brennan & Christopher Freiman, 2020

ETHICS

is concerned with *"human acts."*

Acts of Man

- Does **not require will, intention, and knowledge.**
- Done **spontaneously** as they are natural to a person.
- Considered **morally neutral or amoral.**
- Examples include *walking in a shopping mall, eating lunch, or brushing your teeth.*
- These acts DO NOT belong to a person's idea of morally right or wrong.

Human Acts

- Requires **will, intention, and knowledge.**
- Done **voluntarily with awareness** about the morality of the act and its consequences.
- The person is **aware of whether the action is naturally good or bad.**
- Examples include *helping a needy person even if you're also in need, or killing someone you hate while knowing it's wrong.*
- Subject to the study of ethics because they are the result of a person's choices and reason.

Three Determinants of
MORAL ACTIONS

Motive

Purpose for which a human agent does the act

"What specifically does the agent want?"

- A good intention can't make a bad action good. You can't steal money (bad object) even if you plan to give it to charity (good intention).
- "The end doesn't justify the means."

Circumstance

These are the specific conditions: **who, what, when, where, how much.**

Examples:

- Taking $5 vs. taking $5,000 ***(how much)***
- Taking from a rich person vs. a poor person ***(who)***
- Taking during an emergency vs. for personal gain ***(when/why)***

Circumstances can't make stealing good, but they affect how serious the wrongdoing is.

Object

The **very substance** of the act

"What was performed by the agent?"

- Some actions are always wrong no matter what.
- For instance, murdering an innocent person is always evil - even if you have "good reasons" or special circumstances.

Different Areas of ETHICS

As a branch of philosophy that examines and reflects about morality, ethics is usually categorized into three general subject areas: ***metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics.***

Meta-ethics

- Also known as **analytic ethics.**
- Looks into the nature, meaning, scope, and foundations of moral values and discourses.
- It attempts to shed light on the basic ideas, concepts, and assumptions that underlie our moral beliefs and judgments.
- It focuses on the more fundamental question **"what morality itself is in the first place."**
- **Key Questions it asks:**
  - What is the nature of moral claims?
  - Is morality objective or relative?
  - Who have moral rights?
  - What does it mean to be morally accountable?

Is morality objective or relative? A metaethical question would be, "Is stealing always wrong, regardless of the situation and culture, or is its morality dependent on context?"

Normative Ethics

- Concerned with the moral standards to **determine right from wrong conduct.**
- It involves the formulation of moral norms or rules that can serve as basis of the kind of actions, institutions, and ways of life that we should pursue.

Key Theories

1. **Consequentialism** - moral rightness is based on consequences.
   a. A consequentialist might argue that **lying is wrong because it generally leads to bad outcomes like a loss of trust or harm to others.**
2. **Deontology** - moral rightness is based on the nature of the action itself, often following a rule.
   a. A deontologist might argue that **lying is always wrong because it violates a universal moral rule,** even if lying in a specific situation might lead to a good outcome.
3. **Virtue Ethics** - moral rightness is based on the character of the person performing the act.
   a. A virtue ethicist would ask, **"What would a kind and honest person do in this situation?"**
   b. The right action is the one that demonstrates a virtuous character.

Applied Ethics

- concerned with the ***practical ethical issues in both the personal and social spheres***.
- It uses philosophical methods to examine the permissibility of specific actions and practices.
- It aims to analyze, clarify, and shed light on various ethical issues.

Specializations

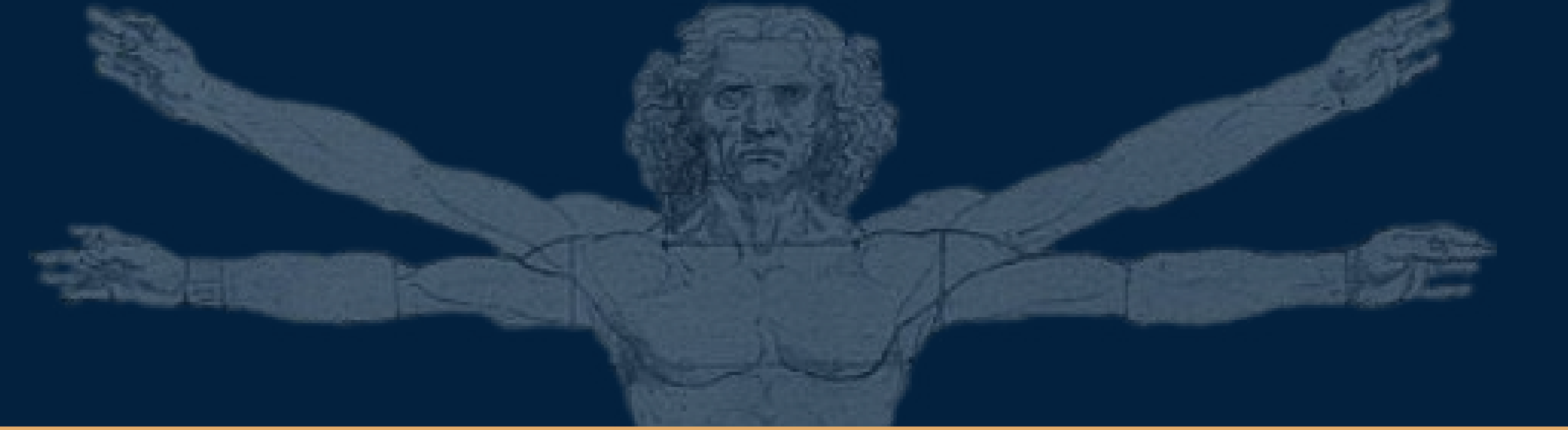
- Business ethics, medical ethics, environmental ethics, law, and applied ethics have all arisen.
- Other issues focus on personal concerns in everyday life, such as *those pertaining to life, health, sex, and relationships.*

Should a doctor assist a terminally ill patient in ending their life, even if it is against the doctor's personal beliefs? This is a question often debated in the context of euthanasia.

Descriptive Ethics

- A subfield of moral philosophy.
- It's descriptive, not prescriptive.
  - **It tells us what people think about morality and how they behave, or how they reason about ethics.**
- It incorporates research from fields like anthropology, psychology, and sociology.
- It attempts to describe and explain *what the case is, not what the case should be.*
- It looks at how moral norms develop in particular groups or societies, but doesn't evaluate whether those beliefs are correct.

An anthropologist might study a tribe in India that throws babies from a temple roof, from a height of 30 to 50 feet, to be caught by a group of men holding a blanket below. A descriptive ethics approach would only describe this practice and the beliefs surrounding it. It would **not attempt to determine whether the action is morally right or wrong.** It focuses on what people do and believe, not on what they should do.



Moral v. Non-moral Norms

The terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are **analogous.**

Non-Moral Norms

- refer to **norms of fashion, mechanics of a game or sport, some house rules and rules of public institutions, and some laws.**

- human acts or actions that are *not related to morality or that cannot be morally* and ethically judged as right or wrong.
  - Even if you violate some rules or standards of the examples mentioned above, you will not be called an immoral person.

Example

A person playing basketball without dribbling the ball is not immoral, if you wear clothes that are not part of the trend; you are not an immoral person.

Moral Norms

- refer to standards categorizing human acts as **either moral or immoral.**
  - These are the actions that can be ethically or morally judged as either

- right or wrong as they are related to our ideas of *what is ideally and morally good* behaviors for a human person as a part of society and as an individual.

Examples

- Do not kill innocent people.
- Do not steal.
- Tell the truth.
- Keep your promises.
- Respect others' dignity and rights.
- Do not cause unnecessary harm.

Seven MORAL PRINCIPLES

In order to guide us in living moral lives, we need moral principles. These principles constitute the blueprint from which our actions and decisions should be based. In order to see whether a particular moral principle is valid, it should possess these seven traits. Some of these traits have gone through the rigorous analysis of moral philosophers while some are pretty much assumed to be universally true. The first five of these are adopted from Louis Pojman while the other two are included because they are pretty much discussed and argued as important characteristics for a valid moral principle.

1 Prescriptivity

- Moral standards are ***not invented, formed, or generated by authoritative bodies or persons*** such as nations' legislative bodies.
- Ideally instead, these values **ought to be considered** in the process of making laws.
- In principle therefore, moral standards **cannot be changed nor nullified** by the decisions of a particular authoritative body.
- One thing about these standards, nonetheless, is that **its validity lies on the soundness or adequacy of the reasons** that are considered to support and justify them.

2 Universalizability

- Moral principles should be **possible to be made universal.**
- A moral principle is ***not valid if it requires an act for certain people but does not require others*** when both groups are in a similar context.
- For instance, it would be wrong to claim that a typical person ought to tell the truth about his romantic relationship while it is acceptable for a rich man to hide the truth about his mistresses simply because of differences in wealth (*and perhaps because the rich man can get away with it*).
- ***Moral principles do not take sides***. If a person is required by basic morality to obey certain moral rules, then all other people in similar context have to do the same.

3 Overridingness

- **Moral principles have a unique authority over other considerations.**
  - If there is an option to either choose financial or personal reason (but not both) when choosing a career, either option is open for the individual.
  - But when moral norms are involved, **they have to take precedence over non-moral norms.**
- We can see this clearly when the norms have to do with what is morally required, which has two types:
  - norms with regards **moral prohibitions** (what we ought NOT do) and;
  - norms with regards **moral obligations** (what we ought to do).
- Whenever these moral norms are in conflict with nonmoral norms, we ought to prioritize the morally required.
- We can see the overridingness of morality once we survey the nature of nonmoral norms and instances where they may be in conflict with moral ones. Consider **social norms**, most common of which are known as *etiquettes*. These are norms that vary from culture to culture.

Social Norms

"wife sharing"

Legal Norms

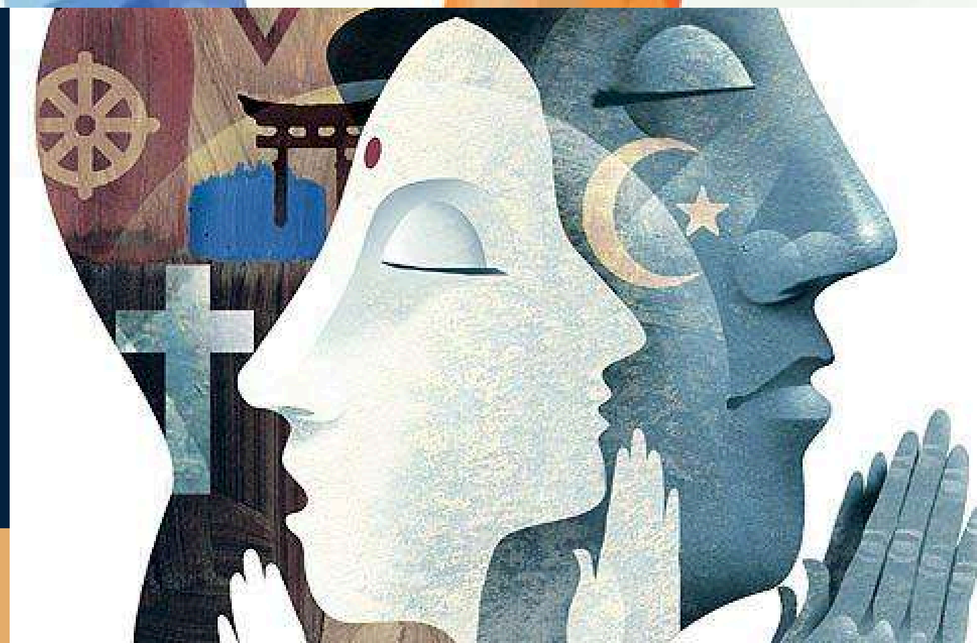
Abortion

Intellectual norms

Nazi human experimentation

Prudential norms

we should choose to follow the moral norm over what would immediately serve our interest.



4 Publicity

- Moral principles should be made public ***in order to strengthen their hold upon us.*** Since morality mostly involves our duties towards one another, moral principles should be explicitly known and imposed to the public.
- It is *self-defeating to keep moral principles a private matter.*

5 Practicability

- *Ought implies can.*
- One can only be required to do something if it is humanly possible for that person to do it. Moral principles should be **workable and doable.**
- Thus, if a person is required to abide by a moral principle, it is to be expected that that person can actually do it.
- Moral principles **should not put an impossible demand** on individuals.
  - Such an overly idealistic requirement may lead someone to moral despair.
  - If a moral law seems to put so much pressure on an individual that the individual is psychologically overwhelmed, it may lead her to decide that the goal is not worth pursuing and thus equates the decision to moral inaction.

6 Normativity

- Moral principles have an **independent binding force** that demands us to follow them.
  - This is easy to prove by way of our phenomenological experience of moral norms.
  - When we are about to do something that we know is wrong, such as lying or making a promise that we know we cannot keep, we feel a force that commands us not to do such act.
- This force of morality is *something independent of our wants and desires*; in fact, we recognize that this force often gets in the way of our immediate desires and wants.
- Many people have called this external force **"the voice of conscience".**
  - But if we disassociate such experience with religious connotations, we may simply regard it as the impersonal voice of morality.

6 Normativity

- Secondly, normativity refers to the idea that **the force of morality is irreducible.**
  - This means that the fact that something is a valid moral principle is enough reason for us to follow it.
  - The fact that honoring your contracts is <u>the right thing to do should be enough reason for us to do it.</u>
  - The fact that stealing is wrong should be enough reason for us not to do it. As such, when somebody asks, “why should I not steal?”, the answer “because it is wrong” should be enough reason for that person not to engage in the act of stealing.
  - To further ask “why shouldn’t I do something that is wrong?” is to ask a tautological question, similar to asking “why is 1 + 1 equal to 2?”

7 Impartiality

- Moral principles **should not favor one group or another** when they have no significant differences that have important moral consequences.
- They should be categorically impartial.
- A just legal system is impartial and does not favor one person over the other merely because they are two different individuals.
  - How about the special considerations given to *senior citizens, persons with disabilities and pregnant women* under our nation's law?
  - For instance these groups of people are given special lanes in fast food restaurants, cinemas and drugstores.
    - Do these treatments imply that moral principles can be partial and still just? ***Not at all. The law gives special considerations to these people because of their special circumstances.***
    - The law equally applies to everyone as long as they satisfy the conditions that these people fulfill.

Filipino philosophy professor Jensen DG. Manebog enumerates six (6) characteristics of moral standards which further differentiate them from non-moral standards.

1

Moral standards involve serious wrongs or significant benefits.

Moral standards deal with matters which can seriously impact, that is, injure or benefit human beings. This is not the case with many non-moral standards.

2

Moral standards ought to be preferred to other values.

Moral standards have overriding character or hegemonic authority. If a moral standard states that a person has the moral obligation to do something, then he/she is supposed to do that even if it conflicts with other non-moral standards, and even with self-interest.

3

Moral standards are not established by authority figures.

Moral standards are not invented, formed, or generated by authoritative bodies or persons such as nations' legislative bodies. Ideally instead, these values ought to be considered in the process of making laws. In principle therefore, moral standards cannot be changed nor nullified by the decisions of a particular authoritative body. One thing about these standards, nonetheless, is that its validity lies on the soundness or adequacy of the reasons that are considered to support and justify them.

Filipino philosophy professor Jensen DG. Manebog enumerates six (6) characteristics of moral standards which further differentiate them from non-moral standards.

4

Moral standards have the trait of *universalizability.*

Simply put, it means that everyone should live up to moral standards. To be more accurate, however, it entails that moral principles must apply to all who are in a relevantly similar situation. If one judges that act A is morally right for a certain person P, then it is morally right for anybody relevantly similar to P.

5

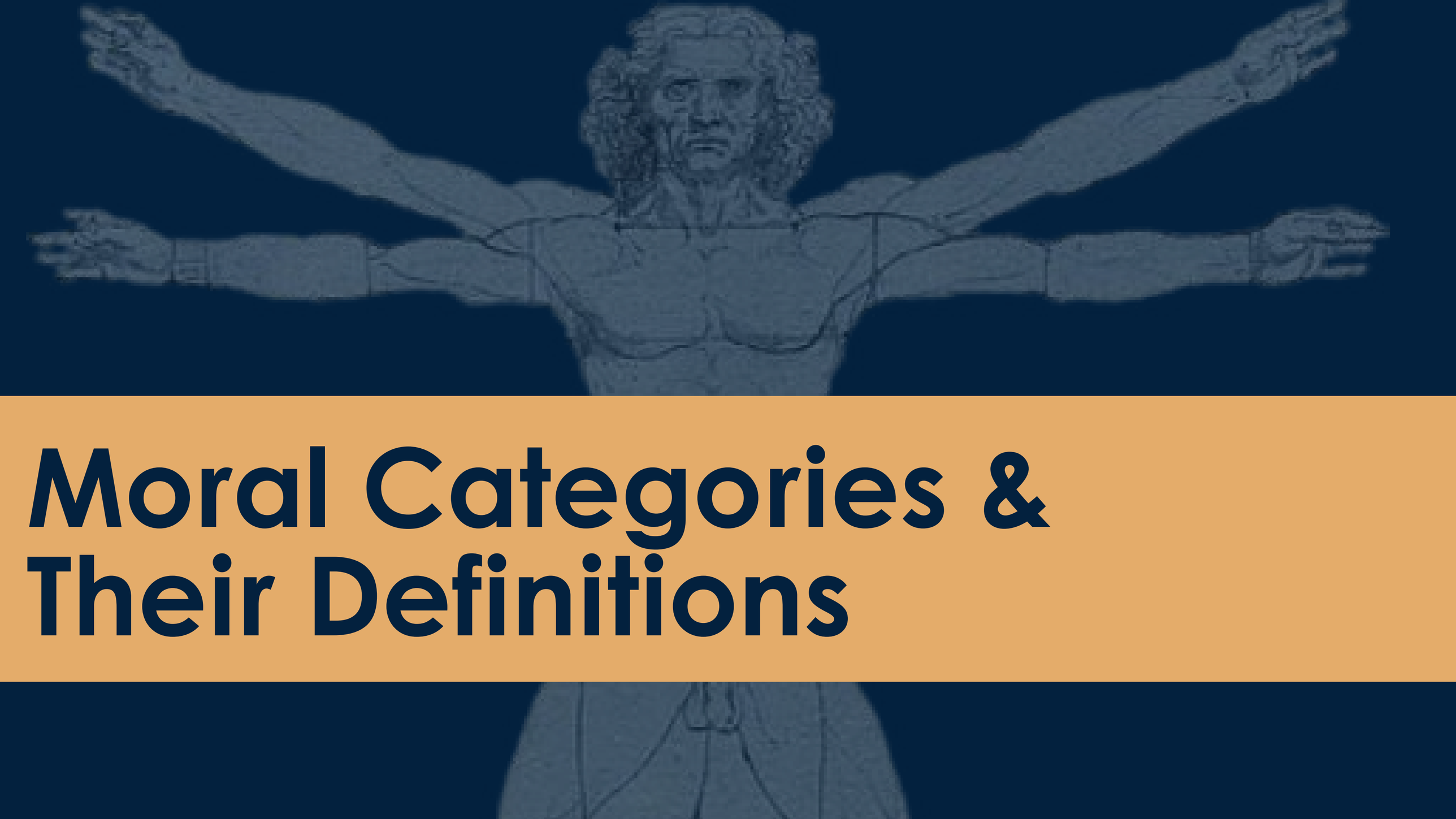
Moral standards are based on *impartial considerations.*

Moral standards do not evaluate standards on the basis of the interests of a certain person or group, but one that goes beyond personal interests to a universal standpoint in which each person's interests are impartially counted as equal. Impartiality in morality requires that we give equal and/or adequate consideration to the interests of all concerned parties.

6

Moral standards are associated with special emotions and vocabulary.

Prescriptivity indicates the practical or action-guiding nature of moral standards. These moral standards are generally put forth as injunction or imperatives (such as, 'Do not kill,' 'Do no unnecessary harm,' and 'Love your neighbor'). These principles are proposed for use, to advise, and to influence action. Retroactively, this feature is used to evaluate behavior, to assign praise and blame, and to produce feelings of satisfaction or of guilt.



Moral Categories & Their Definitions

Morally Neutral

- Actions that are neither morally required nor forbidden; they carry no intrinsic moral weight.
- According to a clear framework, these belong to a middle ground: **neither obligatory nor prohibited, yet permissible.**
- These include truly neutral acts like choosing what clothes to wear; that are morally neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy.

Morally Right Act

A right act is an act that is either morally required for people to do or **brings about positive moral implications and consequences.**

Morally Right Actions

Morally Obligatory

- Actions that **one must perform**, failing to do so is morally wrong or impermissible.
- Obligatory actions are such that **"it is wrong not to do them."**

Example: *The parents are thus ethically "obligated" to care for their children.*

Supererogatory

- These types of actions are seen as going **"above and beyond the call of duty."**
- They are right to do, but it is not wrong not to do them.

Supererogatory

Minimally supererogatory acts

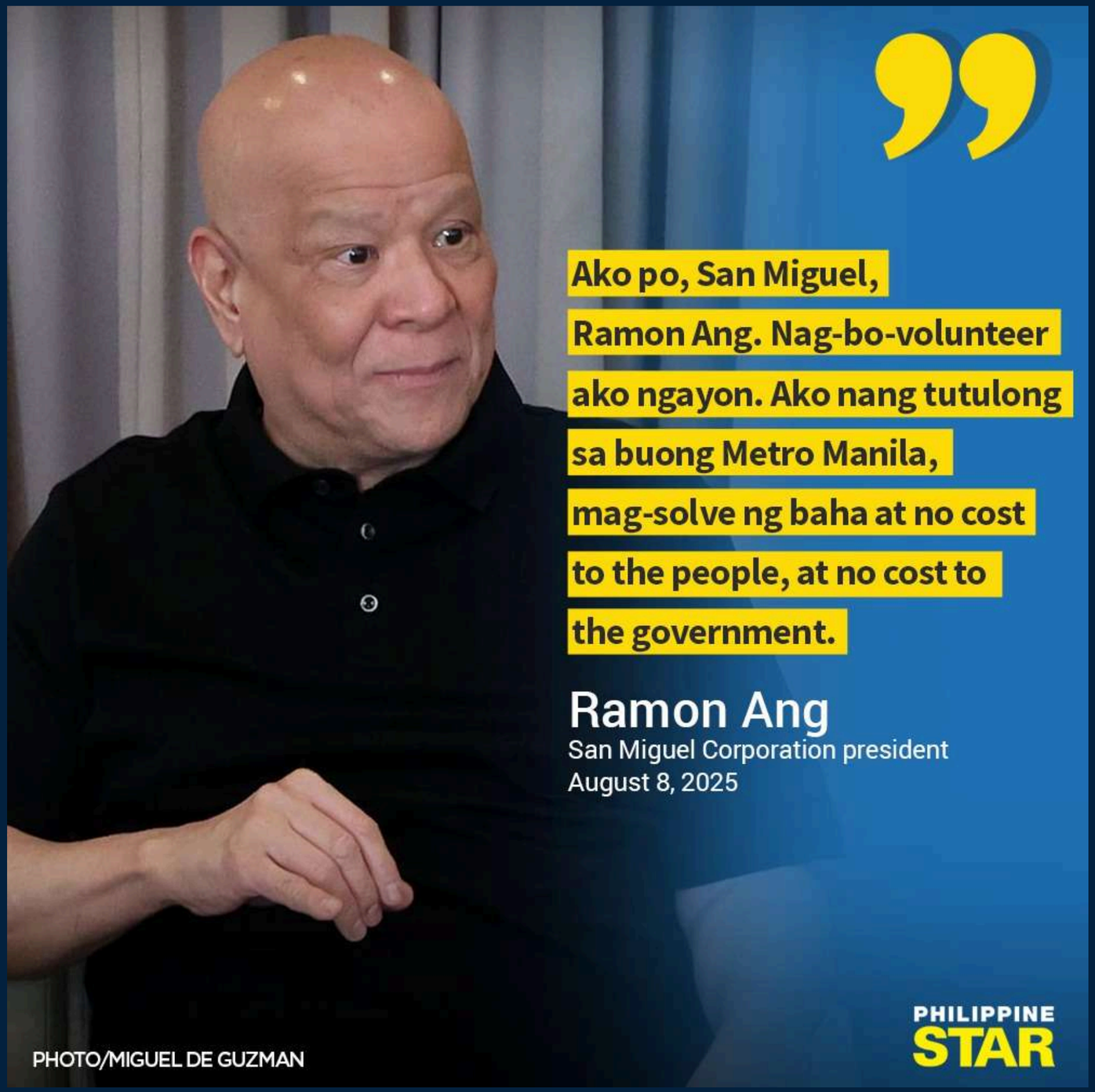
- are good actions that go beyond the call of duty but do not involve a major self-sacrifice on the part of the doer.

Example: *Giving a piece of yellow paper for your classmates when there is a quiz or giving small amount of money to them when they run out of money for certain payments.*

Heroic acts

- Heroic actions are such because they involve major self-sacrifice, either one sacrifices one's life or one's career in order to do the right thing.

Example: *Diving in front of a grenade to save your comrades, or donating a large sum of money to charity when you are not financially obligated to do so.*


Ako po, San Miguel, Ramon Ang. Nag-bo-volunteer ako ngayon. Ako nang tutulong sa buong Metro Manila, mag-solve ng baha at no cost to the people, at no cost to the government.
Ramon Ang
San Miguel Corporation president
August 8, 2025
PHOTO/MIGUEL DE GUZMAN
PHILIPPINE STAR

Morally Wrong Act

A wrong act is either an act that is **morally forbidden for people to do or an extremely culpable wrongdoing**. Both of these actions **deserve moral blame**, sometimes even severe punishment.

Morally Wrong Actions

Morally Prohibited (Impermissible)

- Actions that one **must NOT perform**; doing so is morally wrong. This is also called as merely bad act.

Example: *Stealing, lying, or cheating on a test.*

Evil (Moral Evi)

- Actions of profound moral wrongdoing, involving intentional harm, malice, cruelty, or severe moral violation.
- "Moral evil" refers to morally negative events *caused by intentional actions or inactions.*

Example: *murder, genocide, sexual abuse, torture.*

Updates: Israel bombs Gaza homes killing 35 Palestinians including children

Watch ›

PAOCC finds torture victims in Pampanga POGO; fears more inside | GMA News Online

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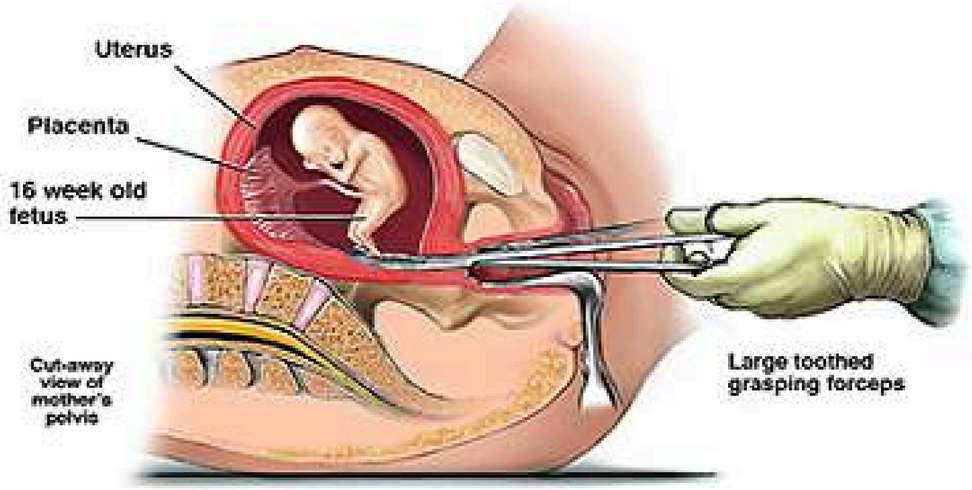
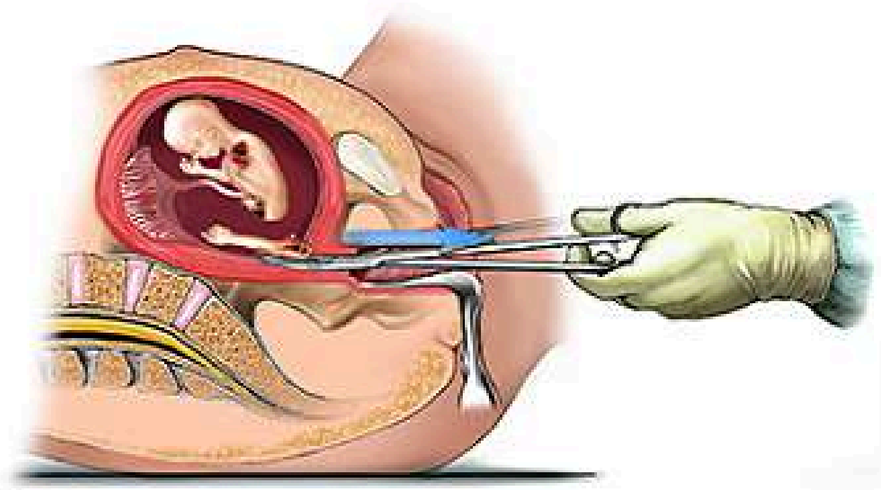
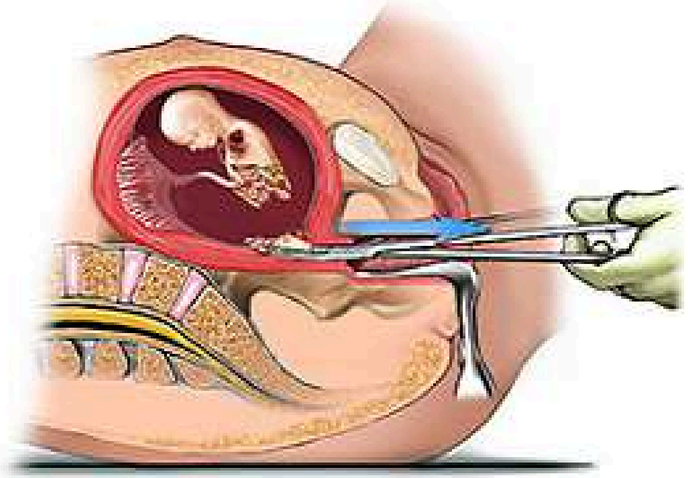
Dilation and Evacuation Abortion (D&E) of a 16 Week Old Fetus



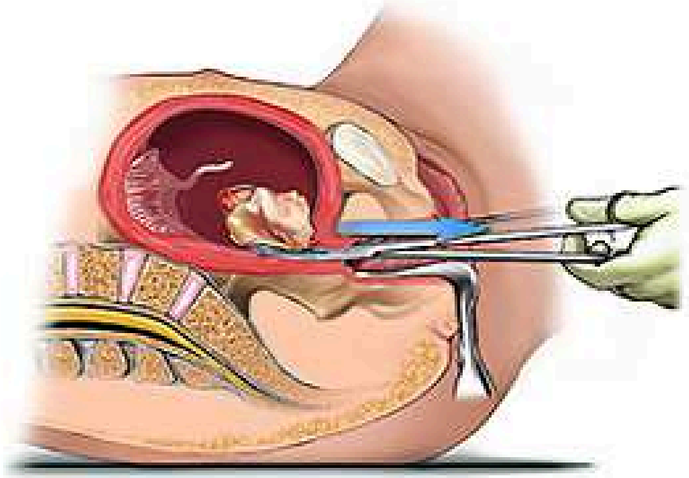
A. The fetal body parts are grasped at random with forceps.



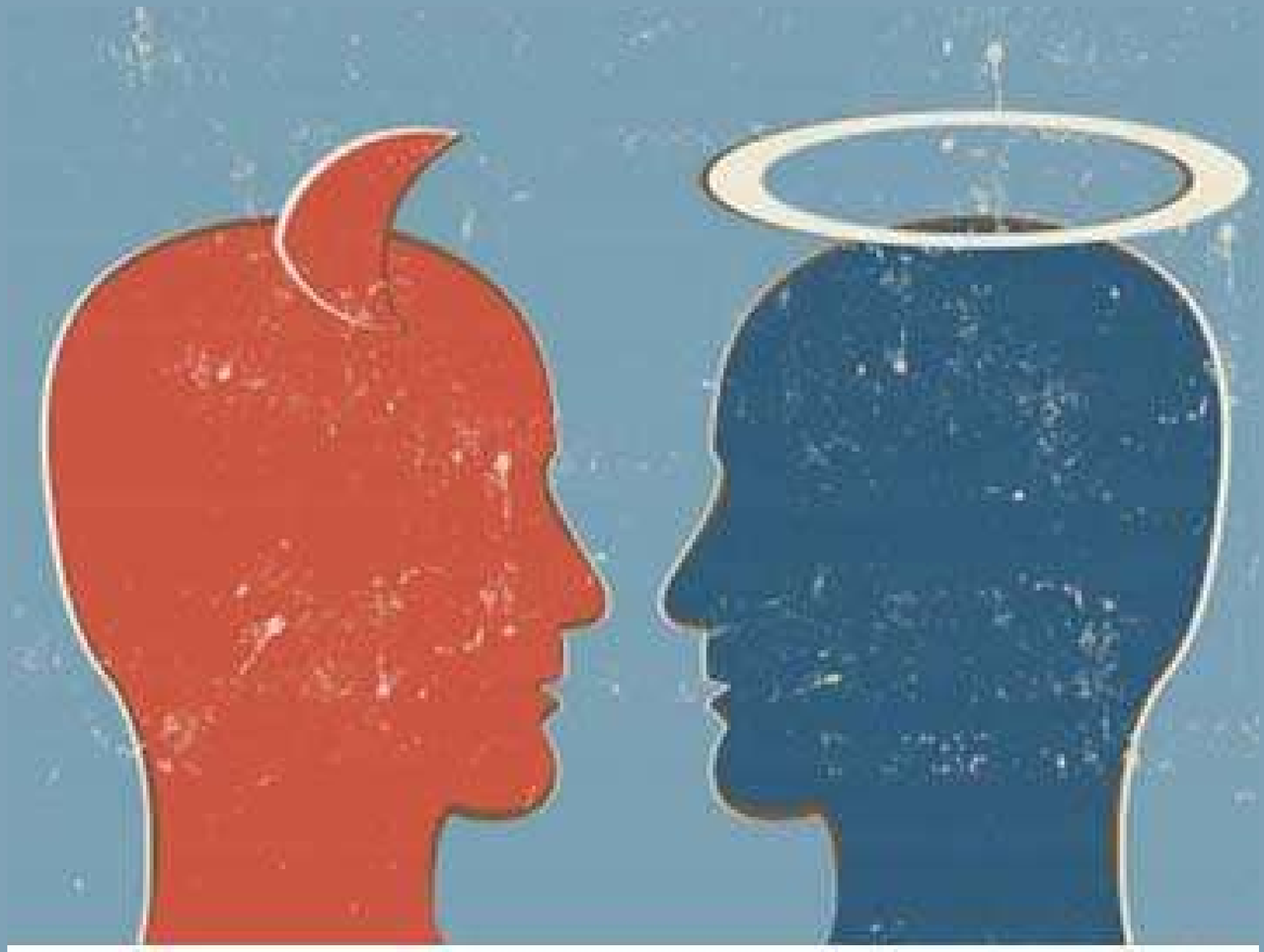
B. The parts are pulled from the fetal body and removed through the vaginal canal.



C. The remaining body parts are grasped and pulled out.



D. The head is grasped with forceps, crushed and then removed through the vaginal canal.



"Ethics is knowing the difference
between what you have a right to do
and what is right to do."
—Potter Stewart, Justice of the Supreme Court

Class Activity

INSTRUCTIONS: Answer the following questions briefly (5-10 sentences each).

1. How does ethics differ from morality? Why is there a need to study ethics?
2. What distinguishes descriptive ethics, meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics? Provide an example of your own to illustrate your argument.
3. Can it be true that only human beings can be *ethical*? Can there be any instance that an animal can be a moral agent? Justify your answers.
4. When do you say that something is a moral experience?
5. Provide one example of a moral norm and one example of a non-moral norm that you personally follow in your daily life. Then, connect your life situation to the ideas of a philosopher whose ethical views can help explain or justify your actions.

CASE STUDY

DILEMMAS

A situation where a tough choice must be made between **two or more undesirable options.**

Not all dilemmas are moral dilemmas.

Moral
DILEMMAS

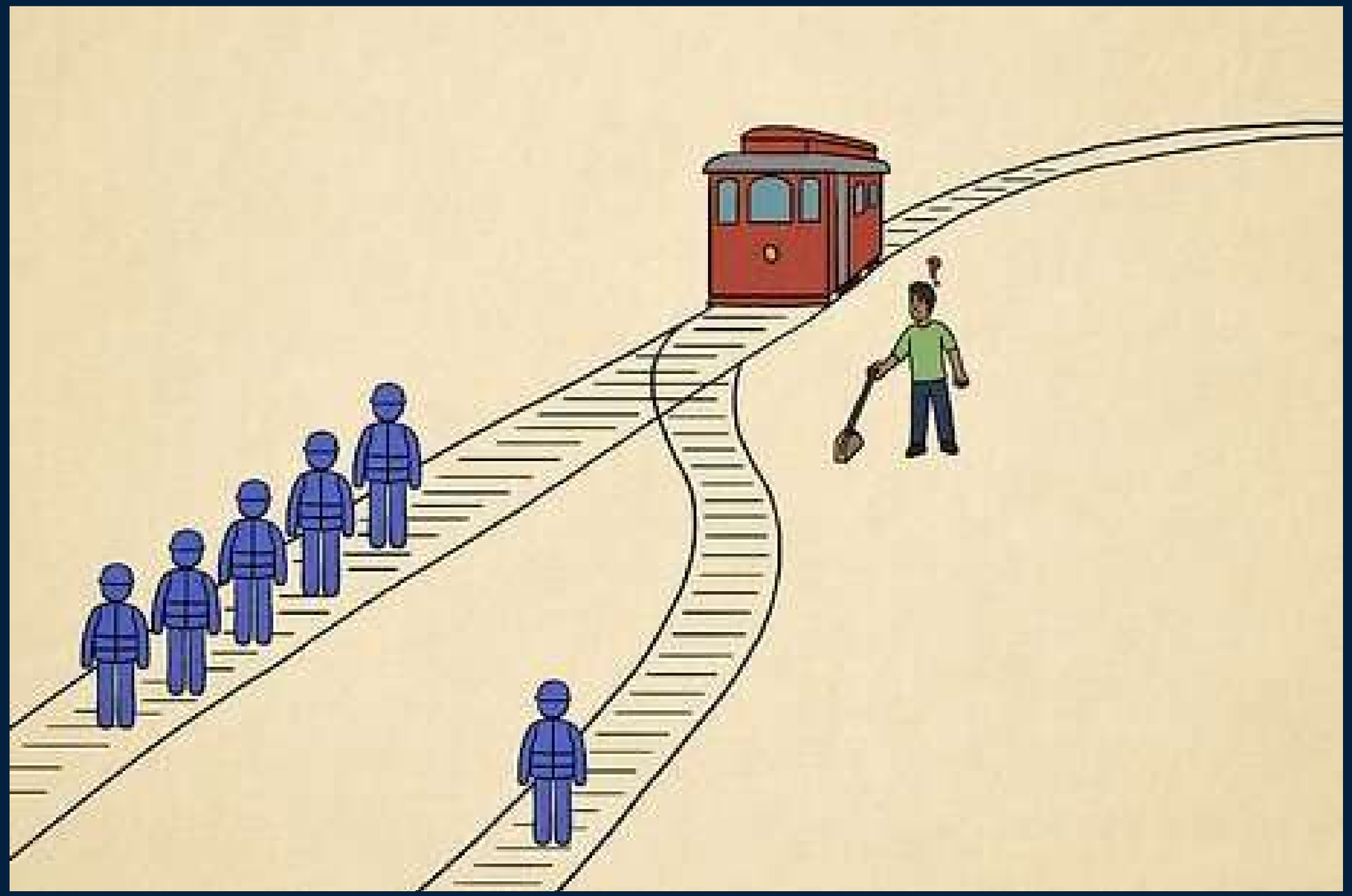
- (also called ***Ethical Dilemma***)
- A situation involving a conflict between two moral principles or requirements.
- Any choice made results in the violation of a moral duty.
- Involves **moral failure**; whatever action the agent takes, something morally wrong or lacking will remain.

Key Features of Moral DILEMMAS

(a) The agent is required to do two (or more) actions.

(b) The agent can do each action, but cannot do both (or all).

- Thus, the agent is bound to fail morally in some sense.



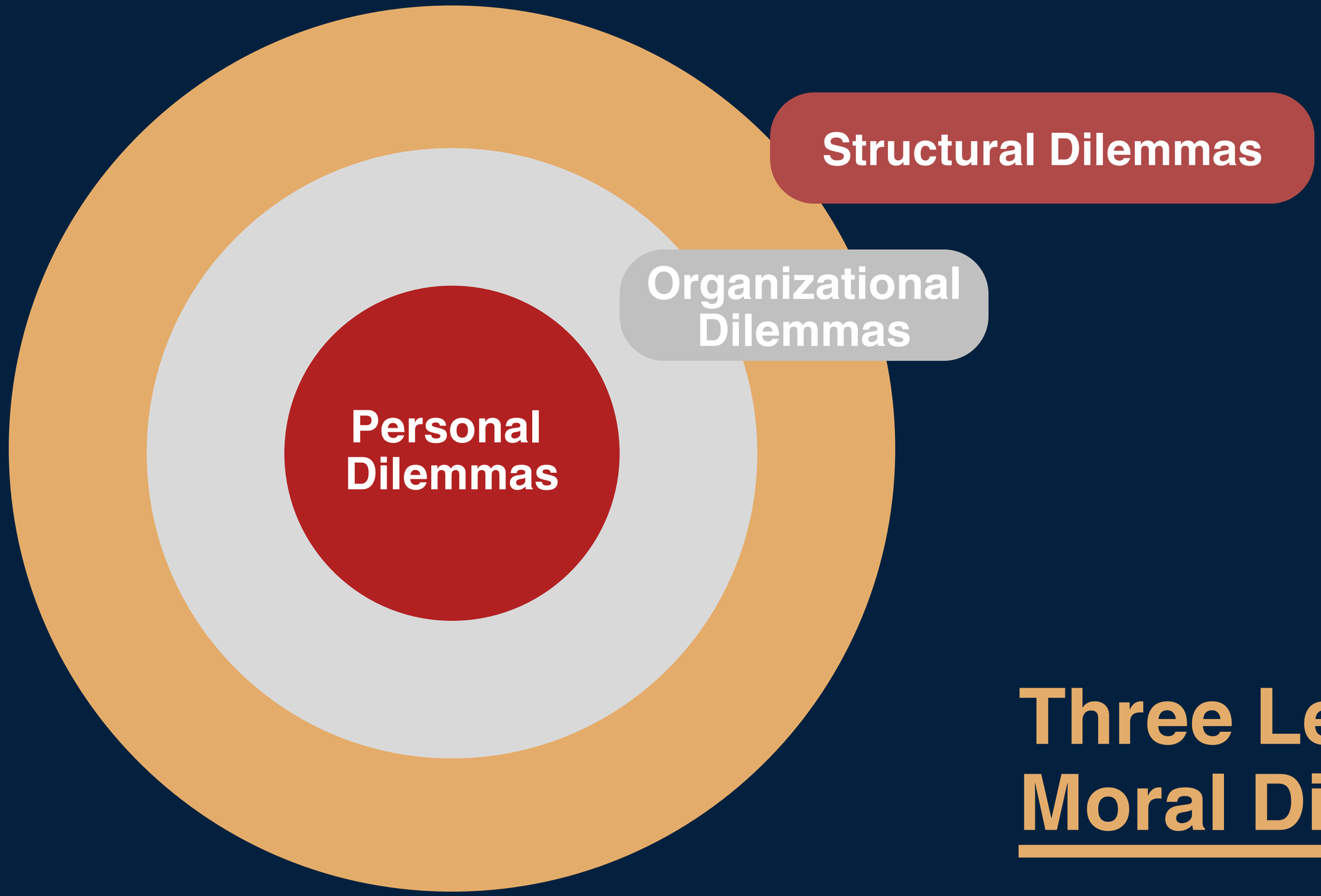
Who should you save?

the scientist who has the cure for cancer

Your mother

Three mistakes to avoid in resolving Moral Dilemmas

1. Do not avoid the dilemma
2. Do not confuse morality with law
3. Should’s are not would’s



Three Levels of Moral Dilemma

Three Levels of Moral Dilemma

Personal Dilemmas

- Experienced and **resolved on a personal level.**
- Since many ethical decisions are personally made, most moral dilemmas fall under this level.
  - An example is Jean-Paul Sartre's case of a student choosing between avenging his brother or staying with his mother.
  - Another example is an individual choosing between the life of a child being delivered and the mother's life.

Three Levels of Moral Dilemma

Organizational Dilemmas

- These are dilemmas that occur within and are faced by social organizations, institutions, and workplaces. They arise from ***policies, practices, and responsibilities to multiple stakeholders.***
- They usually involve balancing the interests of individuals, the organization, and society.
  - **Healthcare Sector**
    - Doctors deciding whether to withdraw life support from a terminally ill patient. The moral conflict lies between preserving life (medical duty) and preventing unnecessary suffering (compassion).
  - **Business Ethics**
    - A company discovers its product has defects that may harm customers. The dilemma is whether to recall the product (ensuring safety but incurring massive financial losses) or keep selling (protecting jobs and revenue but risking consumer harm).
  - **Education Sector**
    - A school administrator must decide whether to expel a top-performing student who cheated. The dilemma involves balancing fairness and discipline (justice for all students) against compassion and giving second chances.
  - **Public Service**
    - A government official may face pressure to award contracts to relatives (favoritism/nepotism) while their duty requires impartiality and transparency.

Three Levels of Moral Dilemma

Structural Dilemmas

- These refer to cases involving **a network of institutions and operative theoretical paradigms.**
- They usually encompass multi-sectoral institutions and organizations and may be larger in scope and extent than organizational dilemmas.

CASE IN POINT

- The prices of medicine in the Philippines are higher compared to other countries with similar economic status. Factors affecting medicine prices include the cost of research, presence of competition, government regulations, and patent protection. ***Institutions may want to lower the costs for the public, but this may ruin the interests or legal rights of the involved researchers, inventors, or pharmaceutical companies who own the patent.***

- **Universal Health Care (UHC)**, locally called **"Kalusugan Pangkalahatan" (KP)**, is a provision to every Filipino for the highest possible quality of health care that is accessible, efficient, equitably distributed, adequately funded, fairly financed, and appropriately used by an informed and empowered public.
  - As a government mandate, UHC intends to ensure that *every Filipino shall receive affordable and quality health benefits by providing adequate resources*—health human resources, health facilities, and health financing.
  - Health financing is a major issue for this program. The government ***could set aside a bigger budget, but this would mean cutting down allocations on other sectors like education or public works.***

Foundations

of Morality

Do robots and animals have **FREEDOM?**

What is FREEDOM?

FREEDOM

- The human person has free will as part of the **rational soul**, **enabling choice, thought, and action.**

- Free will makes a person **autonomous**, able to decide their course of action in any situation.

- True freedom is not just doing what pleases oneself **but the capacity to choose morally good acts.**

- Without free will, the study of morality or ethics would be **meaningless, since morality requires freedom.**

FREEDOM

- The rational soul allows humans to know what is good or bad and to choose accordingly.
- A person may **still choose evil despite knowing what is good**, **showing the role of free will in morality.**
- Ethics focuses on human acts, which require both *knowledge, freedom, and will*.
- Human freedom is **indispensable in judging actions** within Ethics.

“

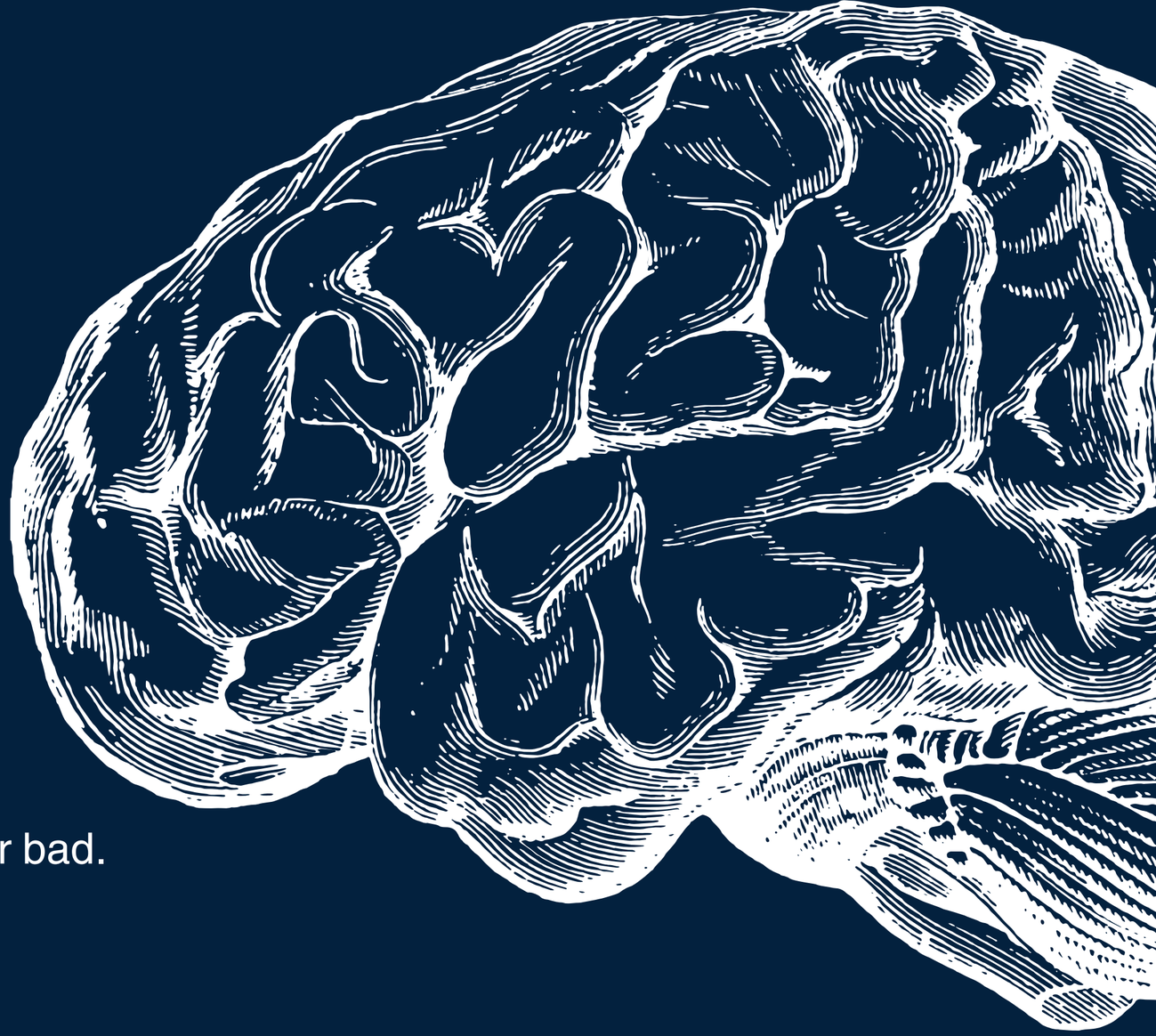
Man is condemned to be free

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

RESPONSIBLITY

Minimum Requirements for Morality

Reason



Reason as foundation of morality

- To be moral, one must first be a rational being.
- Rationality means the ability to reason and grasp knowledge.
- Without reason, a person cannot be moral.

Animals vs. humans

- Animals lack reason; they act on instinct for survival.
- Therefore, animals are not judged as morally good or bad.
- Humans, being rational, are capable of morality.

Role of reason in morality

- Humans know what is moral and immoral through reason.
- Reason allows people to understand and justify actions in society.
- Reason, not instincts or feelings, should guide human actions.

Impartiality

- Refers to judging actions without bias or prejudice.
- Requires objectivity in using reason to evaluate morality.
- Moral actions must be based on impartial considerations, not favoritism.

- **Being objective and disregarding personal preferences is necessary to be moral.**

Assignment

Instructions:

- Identify **three actions** you performed in the past week.
- Classify each action as: *morally neutral, morally right (obligatory or supererogatory), or morally wrong (prohibited or evil)*.
- Explain why you classified it that way, using the definitions and distinctions from today's lesson.
- Write your answers on one page (*handwritten on a yellow pad, to be submitted on our next meeting*).