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CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 02:

# Relativism, Skepticism and Objectivity in Ethics

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



# Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- Describe two types of skepticism about morality: ethical egoism and ethical relativism.
- Evaluate arguments for and against ethical egoism and ethical relativism.
- Explain the aims of a moral theory.
- Explain the moral principle known as the Golden Rule.



# Outline

The following topics will be covered in this lecture:

- Skepticism about Morality
- Self-reliance Argument
- Psychological Egoism
- Toi and Batson Experiment
- Ethical Relativism
- Moral Theories
- Moral Principles

# Topic 01: Skepticism About Morality

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# Case Study 1

The woman who did not wear mask and flouted Covid-19 mask rule, claimed to be 'sovereign' and was arrested later ([Toh 2020](#)).





# Case Study 2

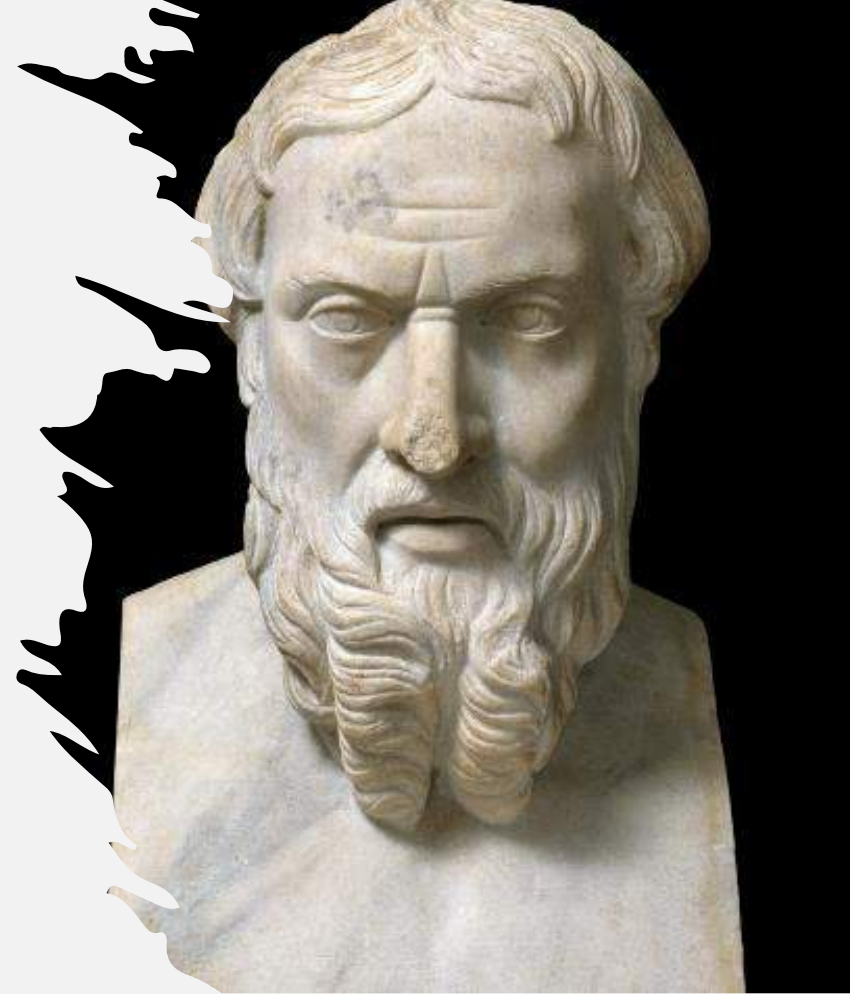
‘Fan Run Run’: A teacher in China had left his students behind during 2008 Sichuan earthquake and it led to a controversy ([Yan 2021](#)).



# Historical Case Study

“When [Darius] was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be present at his court, and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks, and through an interpreter, so that they could understand what was said, he asked some Indians, of the race called Callataie, who do in fact eat their parents’ dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing.”

(Herodotus, Histories, Book 3)



# What's next?

- In this lesson, we'll make a foray into meta-ethics.

Meta-ethics is “[t]he area of moral philosophy that studies...

(i) the meaning of moral words

(ii) the nature of moral thought, and

(iii) the nature of moral properties”

(Suikkanen 2015: 284)

- We'll cast a wide net and discuss two forms of skepticism about morality:
  - ethical egoism
  - ethical relativism



# What is ethical egoism?

- Ethical egoism is a moral theory that claims that an action is morally right if and only if it maximises the agent's self-interest (Shafer-Landau 2019: 35).
  - The Russian-American novelist Ayn Rand is a well-known proponent of ethical egoism.



Ayn Rand (1905-1982)

# Acknowledgements:

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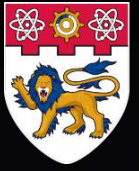
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# Topic 02: Self-Reliance Argument

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# What is self-reliance argument?



Should we accept ethical egoism? One argument for it is called “The Self-Reliance Argument” (Shafer-Landau 2019: 24). It goes like this:

## **Premise 1:**

The most effective way of making everyone better off is for each person to tend only to his own well-being.

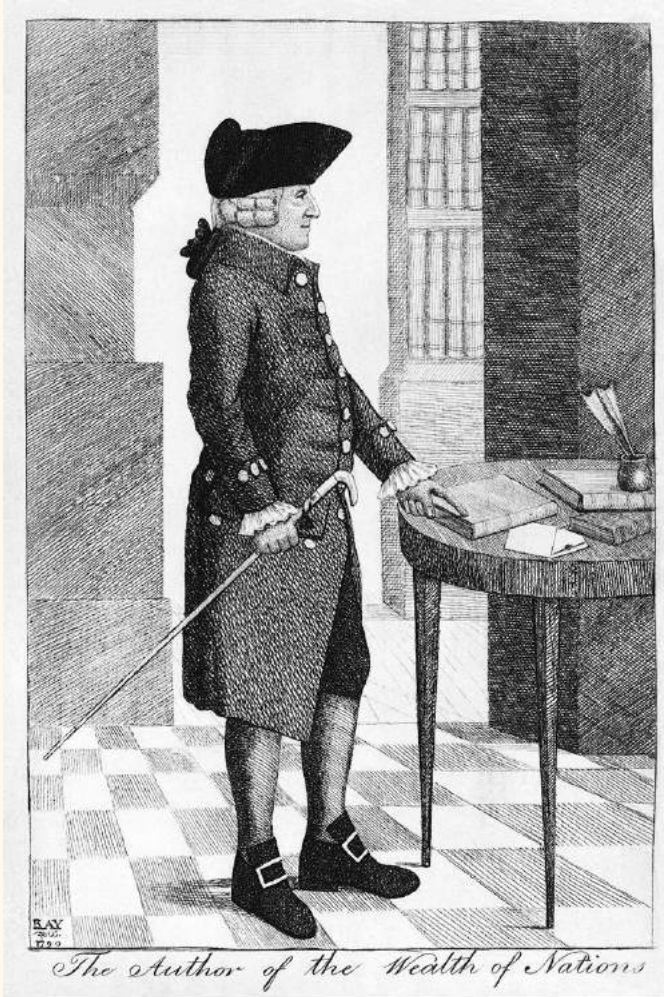
## **Premise 2:**

We each ought to take the most effective path to making everyone better off.

## **Conclusion:**

Therefore, we each ought to tend only to our own well-being.

# First Premise of Self-Reliance Argument



Adam Smith (1723 – 1790)

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.”

(Smith 1776/1982: 119)



# Problem with Self-Reliance Argument

However, there is a problem with premise 1 of the Self-Reliance Argument. In many cases, tending to one's own well-being is not the most effective way to make others better off.



# Self-Reliance Argument and Ethical Egoism

- Refuting the first premise of the Self-Reliance Argument is enough to show that it fails to support ethical egoism.
- But the second premise of the Self-Reliance Argument is also problematic, because it contradicts ethical egoism.

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Slide 12: Shafer-Landau, R., 2019. A concise introduction to ethics. p.24.

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# Topic 03: Psychological Egoism

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# What is psychological egoism?

- A second argument commonly given to support ethical egoism appeals to a psychological hypothesis known as psychological egoism. We will call it the “Argument from Psychological Egoism” (Shafer-Landau 2019: 25).
  - **Psychological egoism** is the hypothesis that that “the ultimate motivation behind every human action is the pursuit of self-interest” (Shafer-Landau 2019: 35).





# Does psychological egoism support ethical egoism?

The argument from psychological egoism for ethical egoism:

**P1:** If psychological egoism is true, then we can't be altruistic.

**P2:** If we can't be altruistic, then it can't be our moral duty to be altruistic.

**P3 (Subconclusion):** Therefore, if psychological egoism is true, then it can't be our moral duty to be altruistic.

**P4:** Psychological egoism is true.



**Conclusion:** Therefore, it can't be our moral duty to be altruistic.

# Argument from Psychological Egoism



- For the Argument from Psychological Egoism to support ethical egoism, all of the premises have to be true. We'll focus on premise 4 (at line 4), which asserts that psychological egoism is true.
- Psychological egoism says that ultimately, all human beings are motivated only to benefit themselves. Is this true? Perhaps not.

# People Extended Help to Others

There are many examples of people who've taken huge risks and suffered great costs to help others, for no obvious benefit.

- The Carnegie Medal is awarded to people “who risk their lives to an extraordinary degree saving or attempting to save the lives of others” (see <https://www.carnegiehero.org/>).
- The [Righteous Among the Nations](#) are non-Jewish people honoured by the state of Israel for taking great risks, and in many cases giving their lives, to save the lives of Jews persecuted during the Holocaust.

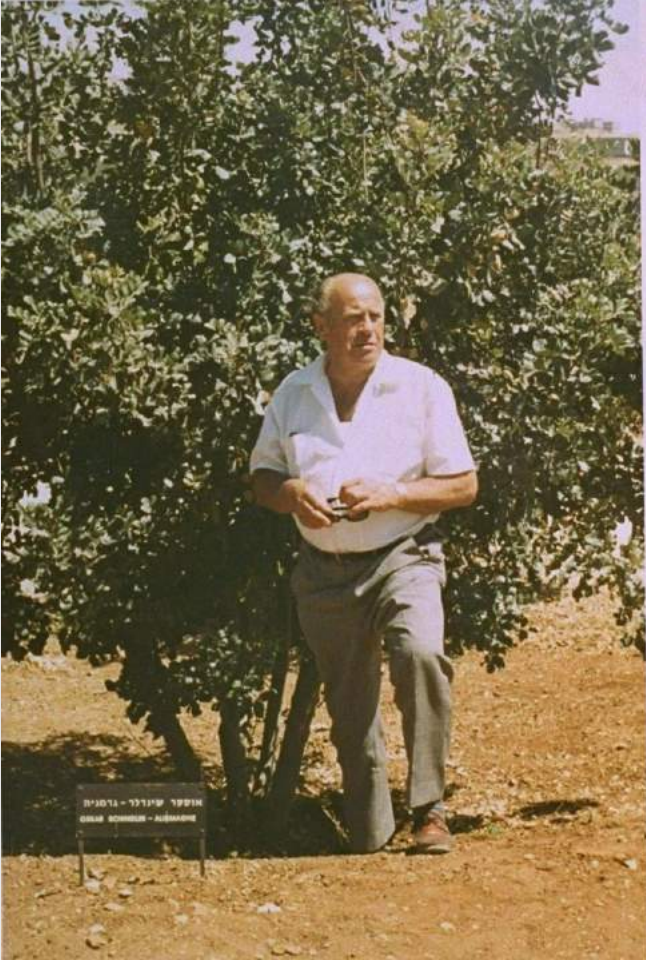
# Rescuers Paid the Price



**Raoul Wallenberg (1912 – disappeared 1945)**



# Persecution of Jews



**Oskar Schindler**

“The persecution of Jews in the General Government in Polish territory gradually worsened in its cruelty. In 1939 and 1940 they were forced to wear the Star of David and were herded together and confined in ghettos. In 1941 and 1942, this unadulterated sadism was fully revealed. And then a thinking man, who had overcome his inner cowardice, simply had to help. There was no other choice.” (Source: [United States Holocaust Museum](#))



# Acknowledgements:

Slide 17: Aldeca Productions (n.d.). Mano con bilancia, tribunale e giustizia [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images.

<https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/mano-con-bilancia-tribunale-e-giustizia/197380212>

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# Topic 04: Toi and Batson Experiment

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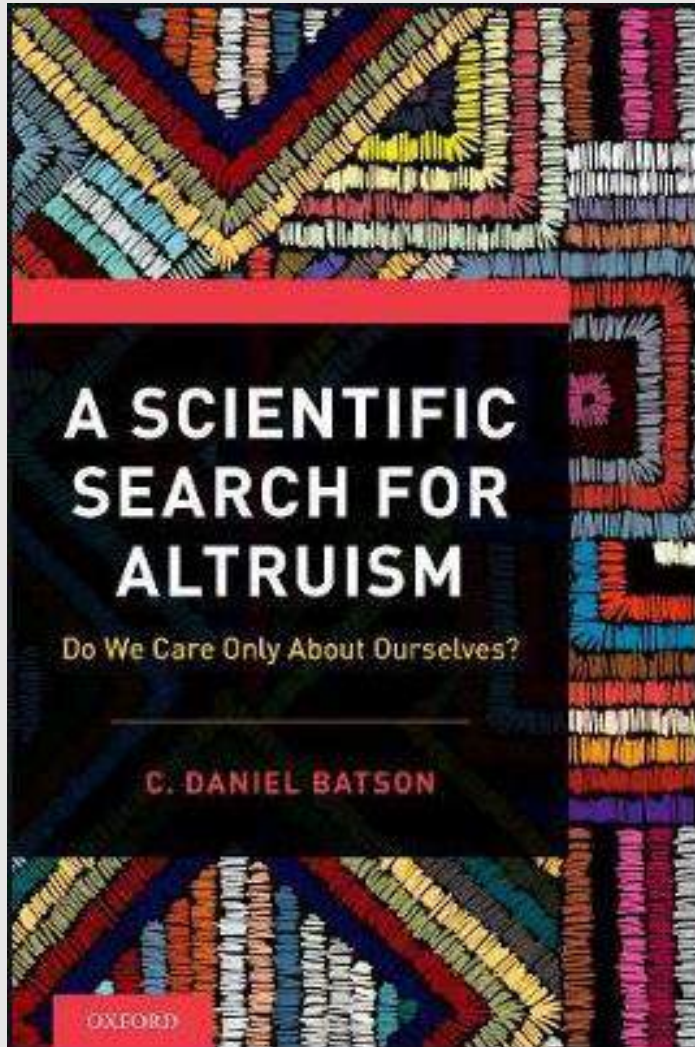
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# Do we care only about ourselves?



# Human Behaviour

Batson and his collaborators have conducted many experiments designed to test whether people behave in a way that's predicted by psychological egoism.

- According to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, the emotion of empathy can generate in someone an ultimate motivation to behave altruistically (Miller 2021: 15-16).
- The empathy-altruism hypothesis contradicts psychological egoism.

# Toi and Batson Experiment: Objective

For example, one experiment by Toi and Batson (1982) investigated whether people would be willing to help someone in need, even when it was easy to “escape” the situation and not provide any help.

- A version of psychological egoism - the “**aversive arousal hypothesis**” predicts that people will not help others when it would be easy to avoid helping them without feeling bad about it.
- The empathy-altruism hypothesis predicts that people who feel empathy for a person in need will help the person, even when it would be easy to avoid helping them without feeling bad about it.



# Toi and Batson Experiment: Step 1

In the Toi and Batson (1982) experiment, students in a psychology class listened to a recorded interview of a classmate who was seriously injured in an auto accident and in need of help. The story was fictitious, but the students didn't know that.

- However, before the students listened to the interview, they were randomly divided into two groups who received different instructions.
  - One group: **emotionally neutral instructions**
  - Another group: **empathy-inducing instructions**
- These two groups were randomly divided into two further subgroups.
  - One subgroup of students was put in the “**difficult escape**” condition
  - The other subgroup of students was put in the “**easy escape**” condition



# Toi and Batson Experiment: Step 2

Finally, all students were given the option to help the injured classmate. The researchers observed the students' decisions, to see if their behaviour aligned with psychological egoism or with the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

The researchers thought that the “aversive-arousal” version of psychological egoism would predict that in the easy escape condition, a low percentage of students would choose to help.

Meanwhile, the researchers thought that the empathy-altruism hypothesis would predict that among students in the easy escape condition who got empathy-inducing instructions, a relatively high percentage would choose to help.



# Toi and Batson Experiment: Outcome

Percentage of students who chose to help injured classmate

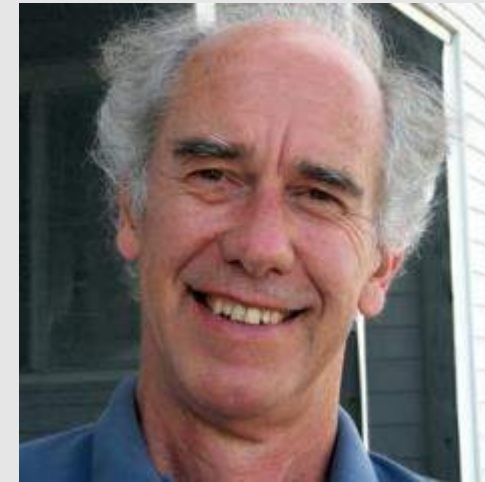
Ease of Escape	Emotionally Neutral Instructions	Empathy-Inducing Instructions
Easy	33%	71%
Difficult	76%	81%





# Empathy - Altruism Hypothesis

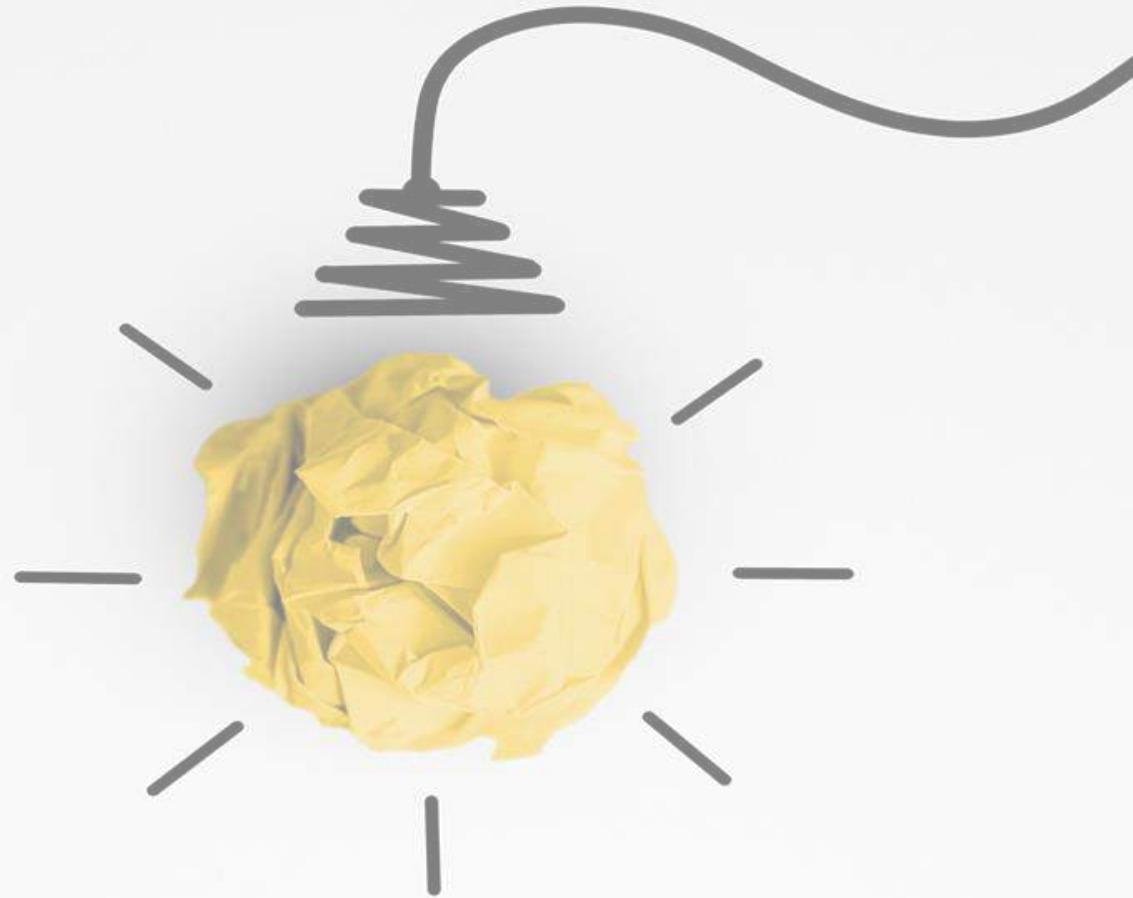
“The idea that empathy produces altruistic motivation may seem improbable given the dominance of Western thought by the doctrine of universal egoism. Yet, in the words of Sherlock Holmes, ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth’. It seems impossible for any known egoistic explanation of the empathy-helping relationship, or any combination of them, to account for the research evidence we have reviewed. So what remains? The empathy-altruism hypothesis. Pending new evidence or a plausible new egoistic explanation of the existing evidence, we seem forced to accept this improbable hypothesis as true.”  
(Batson 2011: 160)



C. Daniel Batson

# Conclusion

- We've considered two arguments for ethical egoism, and found them to be lacking:
  - The self-reliance argument
  - The argument from psychological egoism
- Next, we will consider some “objections” to ethical egoism.





# Objections to Ethical Egoism

The objections to ethical egoism all appeal to what Russ Shafer-Landau calls “starting points” for moral reasoning (see Shafer-Landau 2019: ch. 1, 4-6). He describes the moral starting points as follows.

- First, “plausible ethical assumptions...” (Shafer-Landau 2019: 5).
- Second: “...reasonable constraints that can guide us when thinking about how to live” (Ibid.).
- Third, without a good reason to think they are incorrect, it is reasonable to begin our moral thinking from the starting points.

# Moral Claims

Let's consider a couple of moral claims that seem to be both

- incompatible with ethical egoism
- more plausible than ethical egoism

An action is not a moral duty just because it serves the agent's self-interest.

The well-being of other people has moral value, independent of one's own well-being.

# Acknowledgements:

Slide 25: Aldeca Productions (n.d.). Mano con bilancia, tribunale e giustizia [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/mano-con-bilancia-tribunale-e-giustizia/197380212>

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# Topic 05: Ethical Relativism

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# What is ethical relativism?

Ethical relativism is another form of skepticism about morality.

- There are actually many versions of ethical relativism. We will evaluate a cultural version of the view.
- **Ethical relativism** states that “an act is morally acceptable just because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals” (Shafer-Landau 2019: 28).



# Objective Moral Standards

We are considering ethical relativism as a form of skepticism about morality, because it denies that there are objective moral standards.

- **Objective moral standards** are moral standards “that apply to everyone, even if people don’t believe that they do, even if people are indifferent to them, and even if obeying them fails to satisfy anyone’s desires” (Shafer-Landau 2019: 28).

# Cultural Differences Argument

- Multiple arguments have been made for ethical relativism (see Shafer-Landau 2019, p. 28).
- We will focus on perhaps the most popular argument for ethical relativism. Let's call it the "Cultural Differences Argument" (Rachels 2019: 18).

## Cultural Differences Argument for Ethical Relativism

### Premise:

Different cultures have different moral codes.

### Conclusion:

Therefore, moral standards are only opinions which vary from culture to culture.



# Cultural Differences Argument and Ethical Relativism

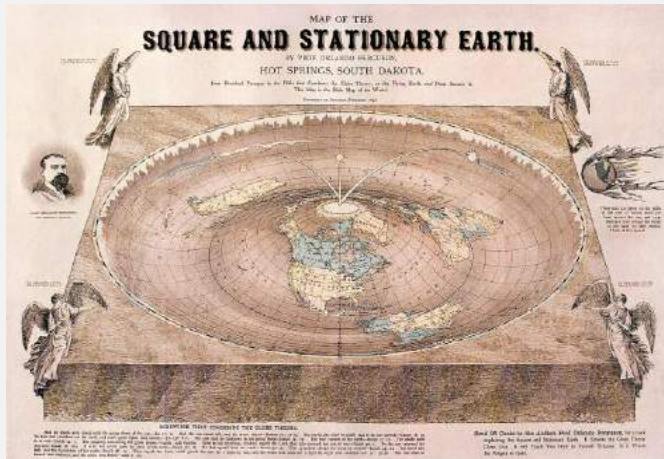
Does the Cultural Differences Argument support ethical relativism?

- The premise at line 1 is true.
- Examples:
  - The difference in opinions between Callatians and Greeks.
  - The practice of [“honor killing.”](#)
- Does the conclusion (at line 2) logically follow from the premise?
  - No. Even if there are differences in moral codes between different cultures, it doesn't necessarily follow that moral standards are only opinions and nothing more.
  - There may be **facts** about morality, with some people having **mistaken** moral opinions.

# Analogy for Cultural Differences Argument

To see why the conclusion of the Cultural Differences Argument doesn't follow from the premise, consider an analogy:

- In many cultures across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, it used to be widely believed that the earth is flat.
- Most likely (and hopefully), you believe the earth is round and so do most people in your culture.
- So, people in different cultures have different beliefs about the shape of the earth. Nevertheless, there is a fact of the matter about the shape of the earth: the earth is round.



# Objections to Ethical Relativism: Infallibility

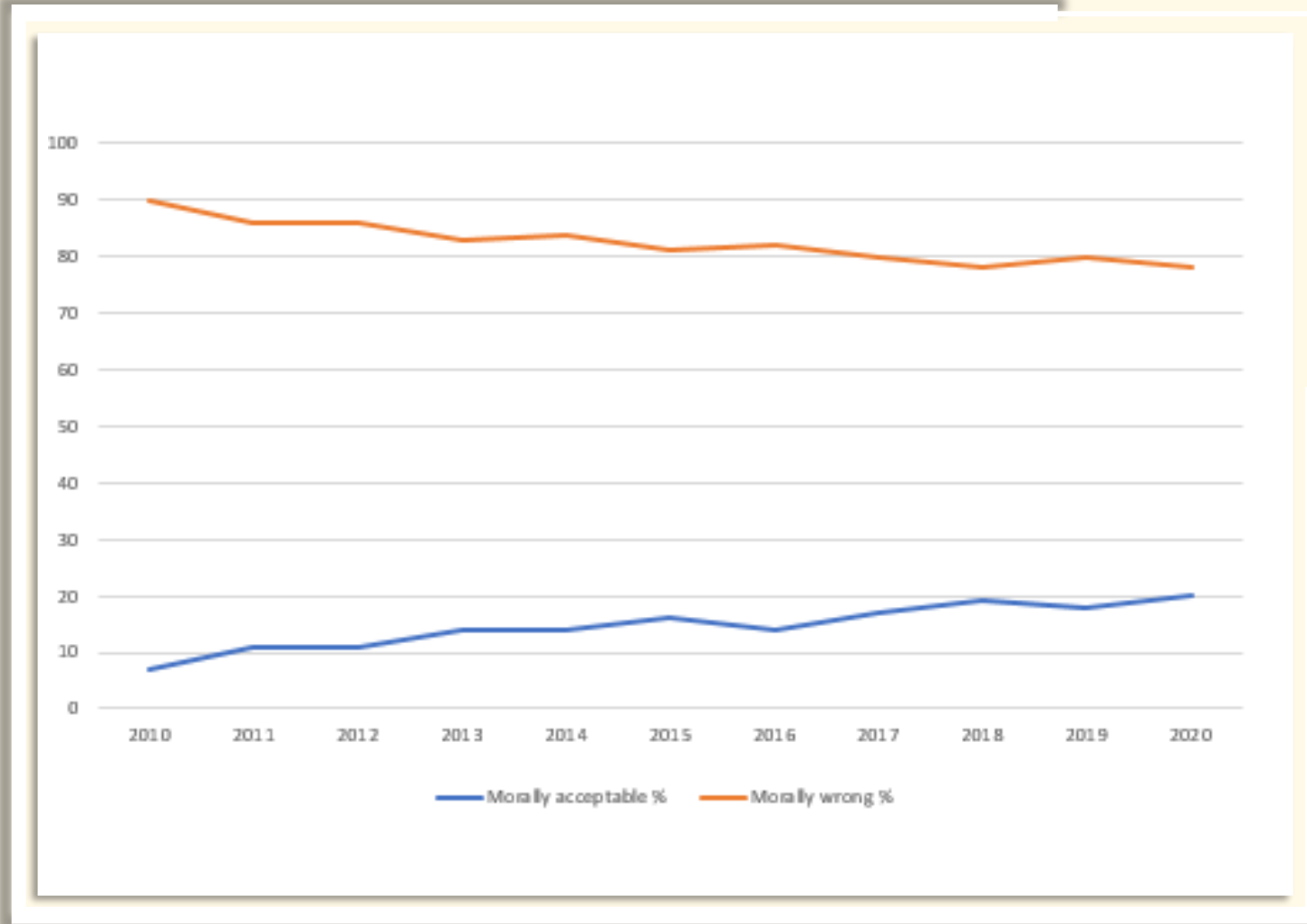
- As we did with ethical egoism, we could also consider objections to ethical relativism. These objections take the form of arguments for rejecting ethical relativism.
- One objection to ethical relativism is the “infallibility” objection (Shafer-Landau 2019: 29).
  - Ethical relativism implies that a culture’s moral code is infallible - incapable of being mistaken. However, it seems that a culture’s moral code can be mistaken.
  - Ethical relativism implies that a moral iconoclast is always mistaken. However, it’s plausible that iconoclasts can have correct moral beliefs.



# Objections to Ethical Relativism: Contradiction

- Aside from appealing to moral starting points, it's also possible to criticise ethical relativism on logical grounds.
- The **law of non-contradiction (LNC)**: a statement and its denial cannot both be true when understood in the same way at the same time (Gensler 2010: 376).
- Ethical relativism implies contradictions, whenever:
  - a person is simultaneously a member of a subculture and a larger culture, and
  - the subculture's moral code contradicts the larger culture's moral code.

# Moral Attitudes toward Polygamy in the US



# Example of Contradiction

Look at this example of a contradiction implied by ethical relativism:

- Joe is a member of a polygamous subculture in the United States where most people believe that polygamy is morally right.
- Joe is also a member of a larger culture i.e., the United States, where most people believe that polygamy is not morally right.
- According to ethical relativism, it is both morally right and not morally right for Joe to practice polygamy. But according to the law of non-contradiction, this cannot be.

# Acknowledgements:

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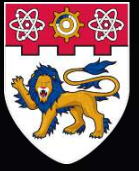
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# Topic 06: Moral Theories

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# What is a moral theory?

In ethics (i.e., moral philosophy), we seek good reasons to support our moral views. When attempting to provide good reasons for moral views, ethicists often refer to moral theories.

- A moral theory is a general explanation of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes things good or bad, and what is the correct or justified method for making moral decisions (Timmons 2020: 3).
- Moral theories aim to be comprehensive: they provide a framework to figure out what is morally right or good in any situation.
- Moral theories are particularly helpful in situations where it is difficult to tell what is right or good.

# Examples of Moral Theory



- Ethical egoism and ethical relativism are two examples of moral theories.
- Other moral theories we will discuss in this lecture include:
  - Utilitarianism
  - Kant's deontology
  - Virtue ethics

# Objectives of Moral Theory

- Ethicists also seek good reasons to accept or reject moral theories.
- Moral theories are developed to achieve two aims (Timmons 2020: 3-4).

**1**

**The theoretical aim**

**2**

**The practical aim**

- To the extent that a moral theory achieves both these two aims, we have good reason to accept it. To the extent that a moral theory fails to achieve either of these aims, we have good reason to reject it.

# First Necessary Condition to meet Theoretical Aim

A necessary condition for a moral theory to meet its theoretical aim is that it should be compatible with the moral starting points (Shafer-Landau 2019: ch 1, pp. 4-6).

- Since the moral starting points are plausible, we'd have reason to reject a moral theory that is not compatible with the moral starting points.
  - Ethical egoism is not compatible with the idea that the **well-being of other people has moral value, independent of one's own well-being.**
  - Ethical relativism is not compatible with the idea that a **culture's moral code is fallible—that is, capable of being mistaken.**

# Second Necessary Condition to meet Theoretical Aim

Another necessary condition for a moral theory to meet its theoretical aim is that it should not violate any **logical principles**, such as the law of non-contradiction.

- A minimal criterion for any explanation is that it must be logical. A moral theory cannot successfully explain what is right and wrong if it has illogical implications.
- One argument against ethical relativism is that it violates the law of non-contradiction. It implies that, in a given situation, an action can be both morally right and not morally right at the same time.



# Necessary Condition to meet Practical Aim

A necessary condition for a moral theory to meet its practical aim is that it must provide clear guidance.

- We need to be able to figure out what should (or shouldn't) be done, according to the moral theory. And, we need to be able to act in accordance with what a moral theory says should/shouldn't be done.
- Ethical relativism fails to provide practical guidance when a subculture's moral code conflicts with the moral code of a larger culture that encompasses the subculture.
  - For example, ethical relativism tells Joe he should and should not be polygamous. But Joe can't be polygamous and not polygamous at the same time!

# Acknowledgements:

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Slide 52 – 54: Ivnl (n.d.). Thinking, perseverance and success concept with light bulb made of colorful puzzle pieces [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. <https://stock.adobe.com/sg/images/thinking-perseverance-and-success-concept-with-light-bulb-made-of-colorful-puzzle-pieces/137575484>

# Topic 07: Moral Principles

CC0003 Ethics and Civics in a Multicultural World

Week 02:

## Relativism, Skepticism and Objectivity in Ethics

Assoc Prof Andres Carlos Luco



# What is a moral principle?

In ethics, we often speak of moral principles.

- **Moral principles** are “general moral statements that specify conditions under which an action is right (or wrong) and something is intrinsically good (or bad)” (Timmons 2020: 3-4).



PRINCIPLES

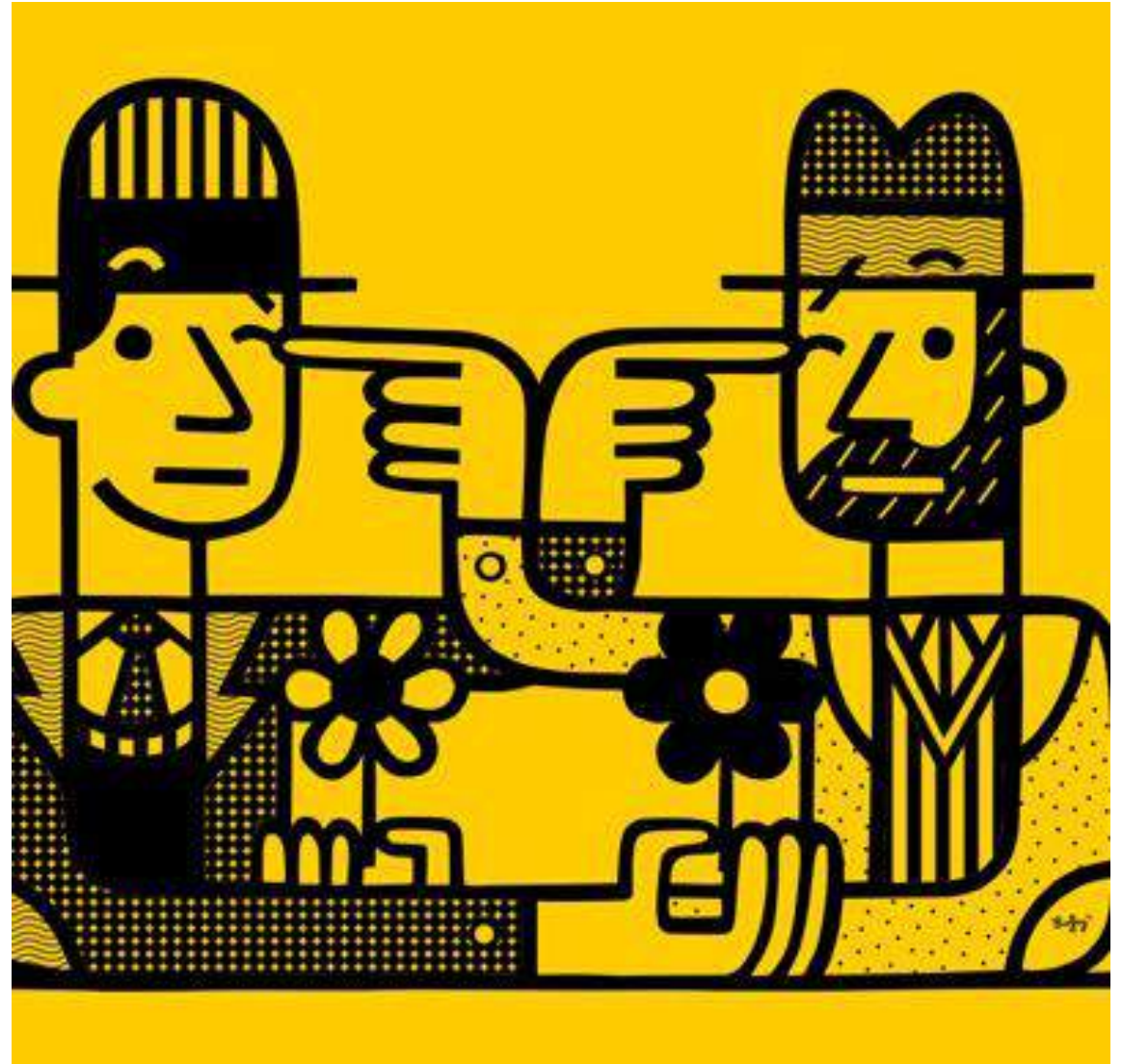
# Theory-Based Moral Principles

- Some moral principles are products of moral theories. To satisfy the theoretical and practical aims of moral theories, moral theories set forth moral principles.
- Examples of theory-based moral principles:
  - **The Principle of Utility (from Utilitarianism):** An action is morally required if and only if it does more to improve overall well-being than any other action you could have done in the circumstances (Shafer-Landau 2020: 93).
  - **The Principle of Universalisability (from Kant's deontology):** An act is morally acceptable if, and only if, its maxim is universalisable. (Shafer-Landau 2020: 112).



# The Golden Rule

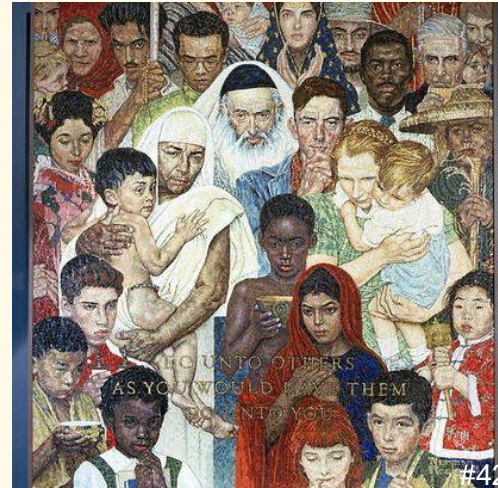
- Other moral principles are not products of any particular moral theory. Instead, they are moral starting points that can serve to test moral theories.
- The **Golden Rule** is one such principle:  
*Treat others as you want to be treated.*  
(Gensler 2013: 1)



# Interpretation of the Golden Rule

As the philosopher Henry J. Gensler interprets it, the Golden Rule prescribes that one should never do both of the following (Gensler 2013: 2):

- do something to another, and
- not be willing that someone else do the same action to you in the same situation



# Golden Rule is Plausible

The Golden Rule is highly plausible. Perhaps because of this, the Golden Rule enjoys broad acceptance across many cultures and religions (see Gensler 2013: ch. 3):



## Hinduism

“One should never do something to others that one would regard as an injury to one's own self.” (Mahābhārata 13.114.8, Critical edition)



## Islam

“None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” (An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith 13, p. 56)



## Yoruba proverb

“One who is going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.”



## Christianity

“Do to others what you want them to do to you.” (Matthew 7:12)

# Consistency Requirements of the Golden Rule



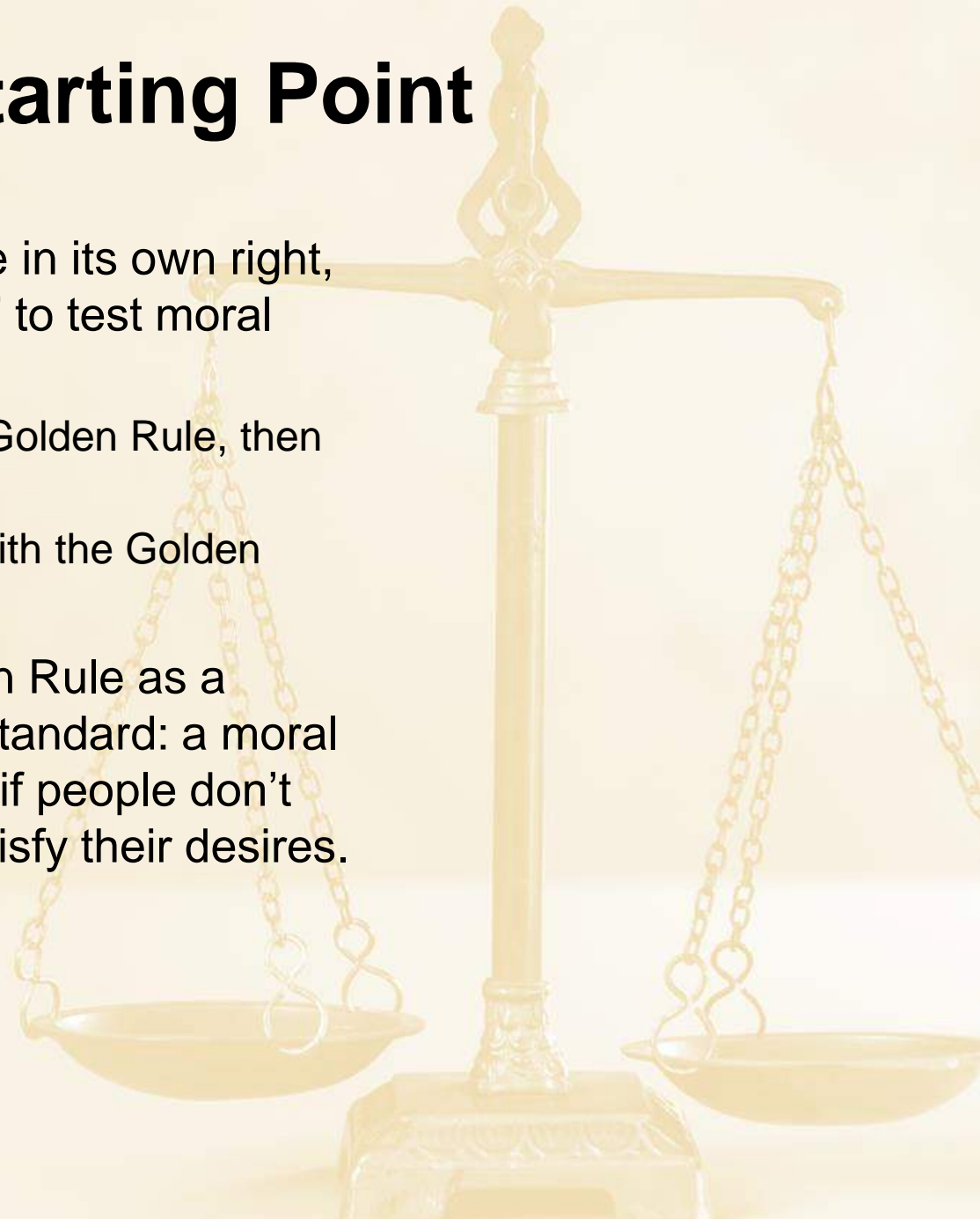
What makes the Golden Rule so plausible? Gensler emphasises that the Golden Rule rests on two “consistency requirements” which are themselves difficult to deny (Gensler 2013: 8).

- **Impartiality:** One should make similar evaluations about similar actions, regardless of the individuals involved (see also Gensler 2013: 14).
- **Conscientiousness:** One should act in conformity with one’s moral beliefs; more precisely: the moral beliefs that one ought to have (see also Gensler 2013: 18).



# Golden Rule: Moral Starting Point

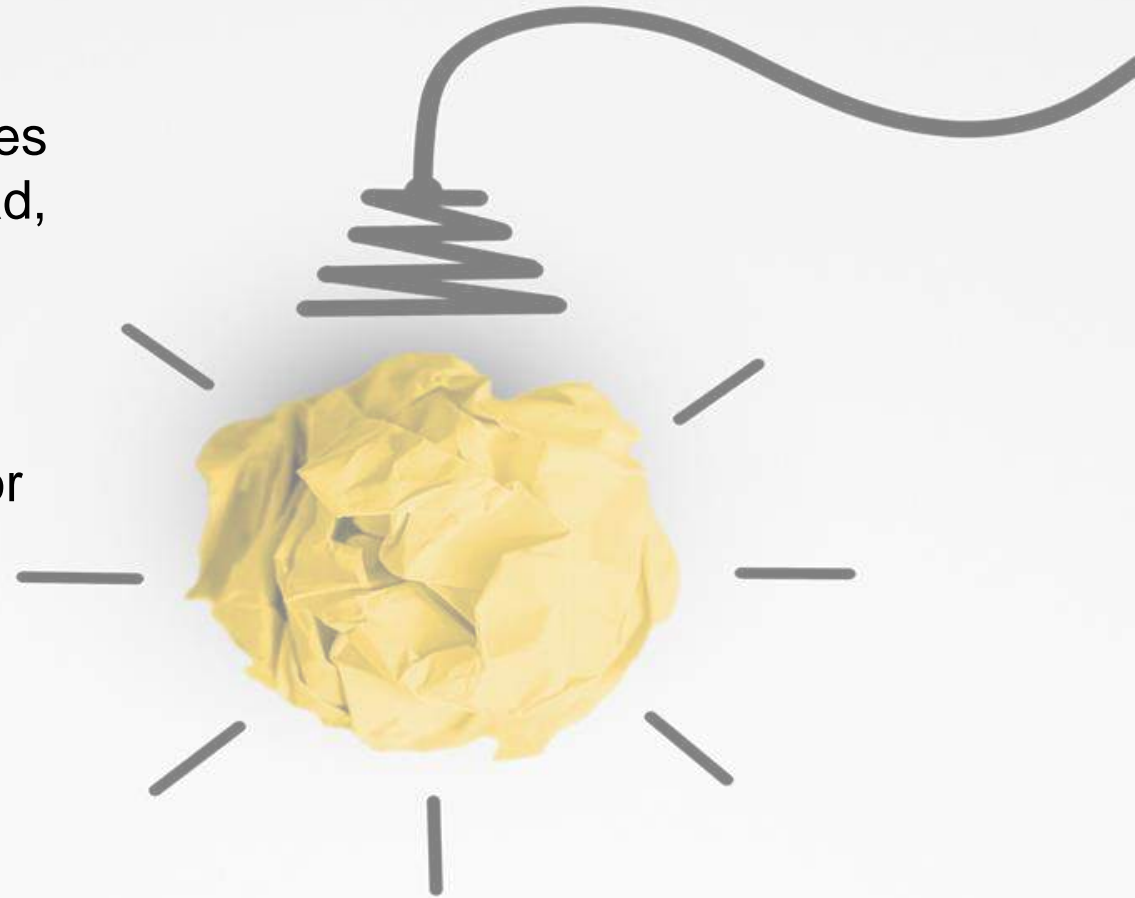
- Because the Golden Rule is so plausible in its own right, it can be used as a moral “starting point” to test moral theories.
  - If a moral theory is compatible with the Golden Rule, then we have reason to accept it.
  - But if a moral theory is not compatible with the Golden Rule, we’d have reason to reject it.
- Moreover, many ethicists see the Golden Rule as a prime candidate for an objective moral standard: a moral standard that applies to everyone, even if people don’t believe it does, and even if it doesn’t satisfy their desires.





# Summarising the Moral Theories

- Moral theories are general explanations of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes things good or bad, and what is the correct or justified method for making moral decisions.
- Moral theories are meant to help us identify good reasons for our moral views. But there can be good or bad reasons to accept moral theories, too.
- We have good reason to accept a moral theory that meets the theoretical and practical aims of a moral theory. We have reason to reject a moral theory that does not meet these aims.
  - To meet the theoretical aim, a moral theory should be compatible with moral starting points.



# Discussion Questions

1. Can it ever be wrong for someone to do what is best for themselves? Can it ever be right for someone *not* to do what's best for themselves?
2. It's been argued that we should accept ethical relativism because we should be tolerant of other cultures. If we should be tolerant of other cultures, should we also be tolerant of intolerant cultures (e.g., imperial Spain, the Third Reich)?
3. Arvin finds Baz stuck in a ditch and crying for someone to help him get out. Arvin reasons, "It would be pathetic for me to want someone to help me out of this ditch. So, I won't help Baz!" Has Arvin followed the Golden Rule?



# Acknowledgements:

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Slide 65: Sosiukin (n.d.). Just a lot of question marks on colored papers. vintage background [Photograph]. Adobe Stock Images. [https://stock.adobe.com/sg/search/images?load\\_type=search&is\\_recent\\_search=&search\\_type=usertyped&k=questions&native\\_visual\\_search=&similar\\_content\\_id=&asset\\_id=334683814](https://stock.adobe.com/sg/search/images?load_type=search&is_recent_search=&search_type=usertyped&k=questions&native_visual_search=&similar_content_id=&asset_id=334683814)

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