



# Values & Virtue: Ethics in action

Professional Skills & Issues

Dr Peggy Gregory

# Thinking about ethics

- Ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and society
  - moral decisions - what are good and bad actions?
  - what are our responsibilities and rights?
  - how do we live a good life?
  - a branch of moral philosophy
- Ethical behaviour is not always:
  - What the law tells you to do
  - Decided by the majority
  - Determined by authority

# How do we make ethical decisions?

- Is ethics based on eternal truths or human convention?
- **Moral realism** – moral principles have an objective foundation, and are not based on subjective human convention
- **Moral subjectivism** – moral judgements reflect personal preference or opinion
- **Moral relativism** – moral standards are grounded in social approval and therefore vary
  - Individually – individuals make their own decisions
  - Socially – societies have a set of beliefs and they change over time

# A moral dilemma

- You are **head nurse** in a busy city hospital during a severe flu outbreak. All intensive care (ICU) beds and ventilators are in use.
- Two new patients urgently need the **last available ICU bed**.
- **Patient A:** A 30-year-old parent with two small children, previously healthy, now in respiratory failure due to flu.
- **Patient B:** A 70-year-old retired doctor who has spent decades serving in the same hospital and is also in critical condition.
- Both have a similar chance of survival if given the ICU bed. Without it, one of them will likely die within hours.

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What factors should you consider - health, age, family, gender, social contribution ... any others?

fast bold  
creative  
inspiration  
leader focus  
transpiration

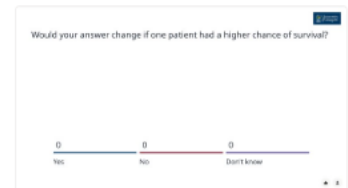
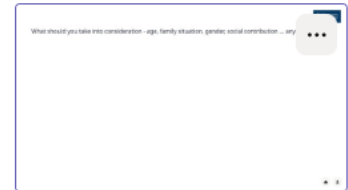


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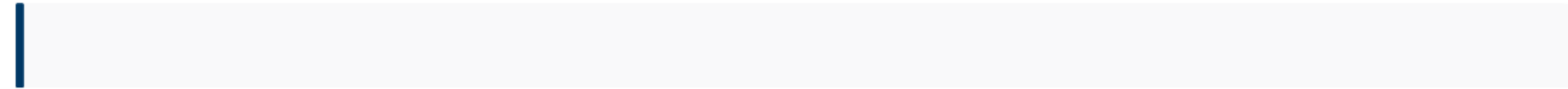


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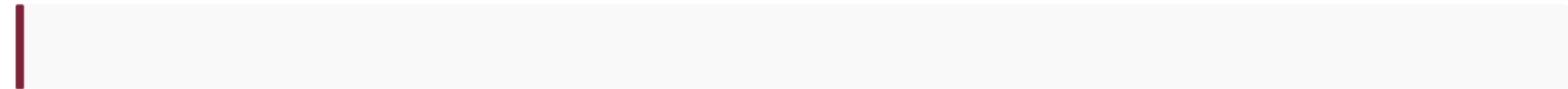


# Which ethical principle is most important?

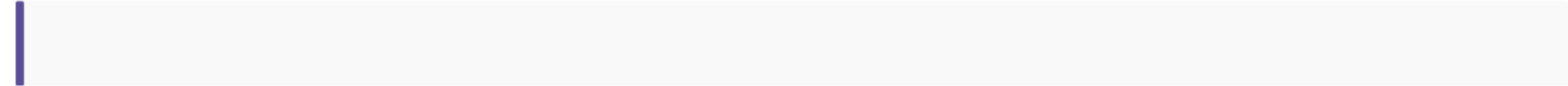
Fairness



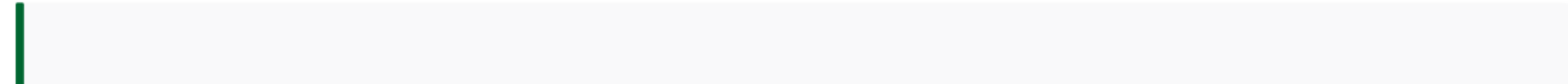
Beneficial outcome



Loyalty



Human dignity

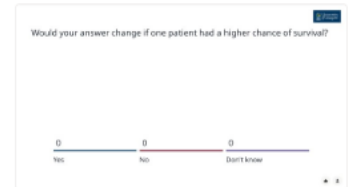
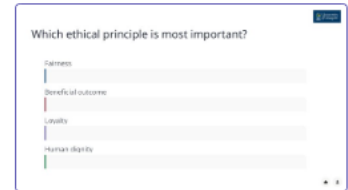


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# Would your answer change if one patient had a higher chance of survival?

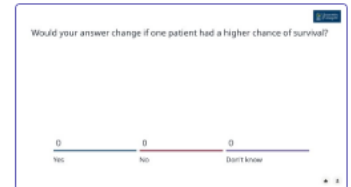


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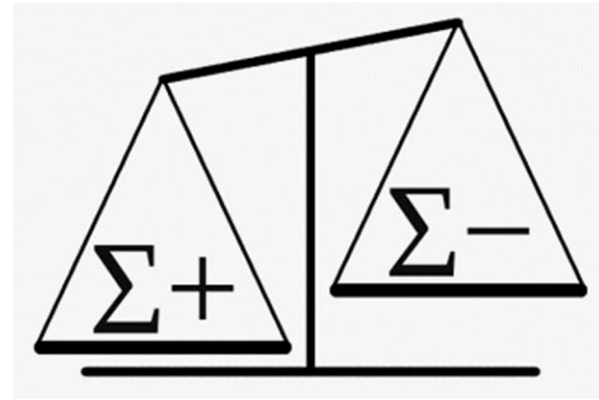
# Ethical Approaches

We will consider several ethical approaches:

- Consequentialism
- Deontology (duty-based ethics)
- Virtue ethics
- Relativism



# Consequentialism



- Of all the things a person might do, the morally right action is the one with the best overall consequences
- Two principles:
  - Whether an act is right or wrong depends only on the **results** of that act
  - The more 'good' consequences an act produces, the better or more morally right that act

# Consequentialism

Consequentialism gives us this guidance when faced with a moral dilemma:

- A person should choose the action that maximises good consequences

And it gives this guidance on life:

- People should live so as to maximise good consequences

# Types of consequentialism

- **Utilitarianism** – decisions should maximise human well-being ('utility') – Jeremy Bentham & John Stuart Mill 19<sup>th</sup>C
- **Ethical altruism** – decisions should maximise the welfare of others – Auguste Comte 19<sup>th</sup>C
- **Hedonism** – decisions should maximise pleasure and contentment Epicurius 1<sup>st</sup>C BC
- **Ecological consequentialism** – decisions should maximise human, animal & ecological benefit. Holmes Rolston 21<sup>st</sup>C

# Practice of consequentialism

- It is difficult to assess the ethical consequences of every single act ('**act consequentialism**')
  - By killing X we could save 10 lives
- Consequentialism produces this conclusion:
  - No type of act is *inherently* wrong - not even murder - it depends on the result of the act
- However, we can derive ethical rules by considering the general consequences of types of acts ('**rule consequentialism**'), i.e.
  - Murder is wrong because it deprives individuals of their life and produces other bad consequences

# Act and Rule Consequentialism

## Act consequentialism

Act consequentialism looks at every single moral choice anew. So,

- A particular action is morally good only if it produces more overall good than any alternative action

## Rule consequentialism

Rule consequentialism bases *moral rules* on their consequences. So,

- Whether acts are good or bad depends on moral rules
- Moral rules are chosen solely on the basis of their consequences
- Individuals should apply rules to make a moral choice. The rules are those that would produce the best results if adopted by most people.

# Deontology - Duty-based ethics

- Duty-based (deontological) ethics are concerned with the decision and what people do, not with the consequences of their actions.
  - Do the right thing.
  - Do it because it's the right thing to do.
  - Don't do wrong things.
  - Avoid them because they are wrong.
- In this approach you don't justify an action by showing that it produces good consequences (non-consequentialist)
- 'Deontological' from Greek word *deon*, means 'duty'.
- Some kinds of action are wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the consequences.

# Moral rules of deontologists

- Deontologists live in a universe of moral rules, such as:
  - It is wrong to kill people
  - It is wrong to steal
  - It is right to keep promises
- Some rules might be complex
  - It is right to keep promises when they are made formally and seriously unless circumstances have changed and the original promise no longer makes sense.
- Someone who follows duty-based ethics should do the right thing, even if that produces more harm (or less good) than doing the wrong thing:
  - People have a duty to do the right thing, even if it produces a bad result.

# Kant's categorical Imperative

- Categorical imperative (a rule that is true in all circumstances)  
basis of all other rules
- Two ways of expressing it (but it's one rule)
  - Always act in such a way that you would be willing for it to become a general law that everyone else should do the same in the same situation
  - Act so that you treat humanity, both yourself and others, always as an end and never merely as a means to an end.



# Virtue ethics

- A right act is the action a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances
- Person-based rather than action-based, about moral **character**
- Virtue is an excellent character trait that is whole-heartedly understood by the person who possesses it
- We acquire virtue through practice and by honing virtuous habits we will make better choices when faced with challenges
- Virtue is about finding the golden mean between extremes

Aristotle 4<sup>th</sup>C BC

# Example Virtues

- Justice
  - Justice requires us to treat human beings equally and impartially
- Fidelity
  - Fidelity requires that we treat people close to us with special care
- Self-care
  - We have a unique responsibility to care for ourselves, mentally, physically & spiritually
- Prudence
  - The prudent person does all the above and looks for opportunities to acquire more virtue in them

# Moral Relativism

- Moral relativism states that there are no **objective** moral truths out there.
- There are no objective moral facts. Therefore 'killing people is wrong' can't be *objectively* true
- Many forms of relativism go further and say that moral statements describe how the speaker feels about a particular ethical issue.
  - Moral statements are just factual statements about the *attitude the speaker* holds on a particular issue
  - So if I say "Lying is wrong", I'm telling you I disapprove of telling lies

# Different relativist positions

- Many different positions
- Some moral relativism is 'descriptive':
  - Describing different cultures
    - Different cultures take different moral stances, at any one time and over time
  - Describing individuals
    - Different individuals take different moral views based on their beliefs
- Some moral relativism is 'normative'
  - Morality has no objective factual basis; therefore, it is not possible to say that one moral stance is 'right' and another is 'wrong'

# Thinking about 'values'

- **Ethics** looks at moral principles and guidelines that help people think about what is right and wrong. Ethics seeks to answer questions about how individuals '**should**' act, make decisions, and interact with other.
- **Values** reflect beliefs about what is important, desirable, and meaningful in life. Values serve as motivators that influence attitudes, behaviours, and choices.

# Schwartz on values

- Schwartz, a psychologist, developed a theory of values based on many empirical studies across different cultures over years
- Ten basic human values form a circular continuum, defined according to the motivation that underlies each of them
  - Values refer to desirable goals that motivate action
  - Values guide the selection of actions, policies, people, and events
  - The relative importance of multiple values guides action

# Schwartz's ten basic values

<b>Value</b>	<b>Defining goal</b>
<i>Self-Direction</i>	independent thought and action, expressed in choosing, creating and exploring
<i>Stimulation</i>	excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
<i>Hedonism</i>	pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself
<i>Achievement</i>	personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
<i>Power</i>	control or dominance over people and resources
<i>Security</i>	safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self
<i>Conformity</i>	restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms
<i>Tradition</i>	respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides
<i>Benevolence</i>	preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (the 'in-group')
<i>Universalism</i>	understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of <i>all</i> people and for nature

## SELF-DIRECTION

Independent ●

Freedom ●

Curious ●

Creativity ●

Choosing  
own goals

Privacy ●

Self-respect ●

## STIMULATION

Daring ●

Variation  
in life

Excitement  
in life

Enjoying life ●

Self-indulgent ●

Pleasure ●

## HEDONISM

Intelligent ●

Capable ●

Successful ●

Influential ●

Ambitious ●

## ACHIEVEMENT

Social  
recognition

Wealth ●

Authority ●

Social power ●

## POWER

Preserving my  
public image

Broadminded ●

Unity with nature ●

A world of beauty ●

A world at peace ●

Wisdom ●

Mature love ●

True friendship ●

Meaning in life ●

Responsible ●

Equality ●

Protecting the environment ●

Inner harmony ●

Social justice ●

A spiritual life ●

Forgiving ●

Honest ●

Loyal ●

## UNIVERSALISM

## BENEVOLENCE

## CONFORMITY

Self-discipline ●

Politeness ●

Honouring  
of elders

Healthy ●

Family security ●

Social order ●

Clean ●

Reciprocation  
of favours

National  
security

Sense of  
belonging

Obedient ●

Humble ●

Detachment ●

Devout ●

Respect  
for tradition

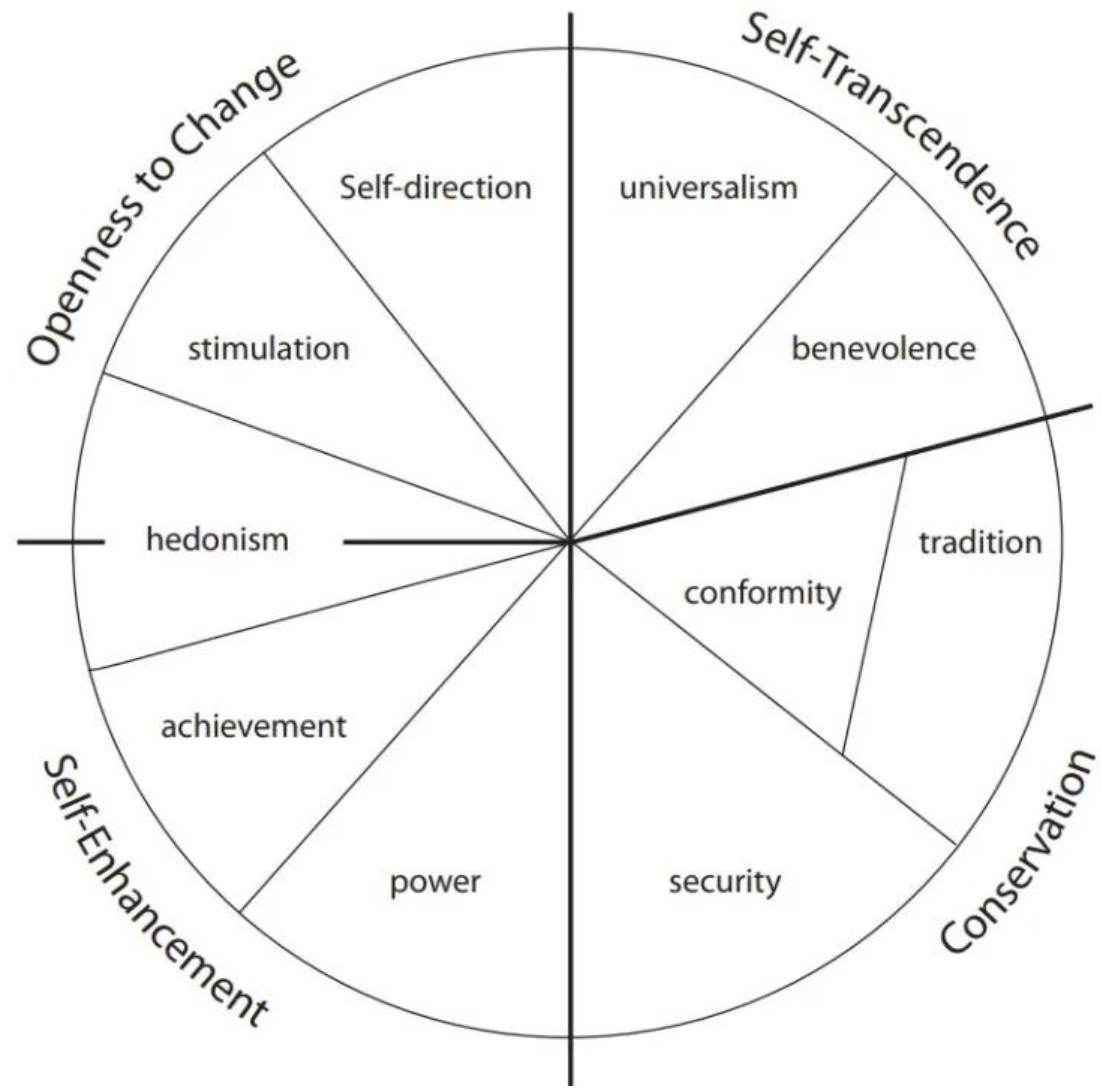
Moderate ●

## TRADITION

Accepting my  
portion in life

## SECURITY





# Useful sources

- University of Texas, Ethics Unwrapped  
<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/> (quick read)
- Stanford University, Dictionary of Philosophy  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/> (for detailed explanations)
- Schwartz, S. 2022 Understanding values: Schwartz theory of basic values <https://i2insights.org/2022/05/10/schwartz-theory-of-basic-values/>