

# 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. 11 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.



Menti

Wk 3 ethics



Join at [menti.com](https://menti.com) | use code 3537 2409



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

Choose a slide to present

What should you take into consideration - age, family situation, gender, social contribution ... any others?

Which ethical principle is most important?

Benefit	100%
Beneficial outcome	0%
Equality	0%
Human dignity	0%

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

0 Yes      0 No      0 Don't know

fast bold  
creative leader focus  
inspiration transpiration





Join at [menti.com](https://menti.com) | use code 3537 2409



Menti

Wk 3 ethics

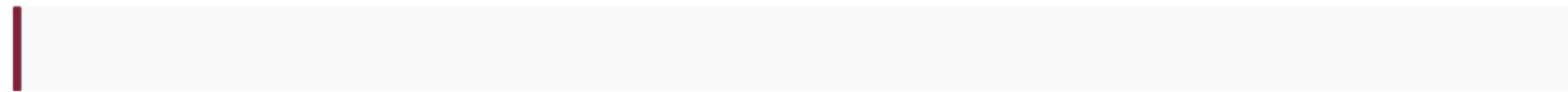


# Which ethical principle is most important?

Fairness



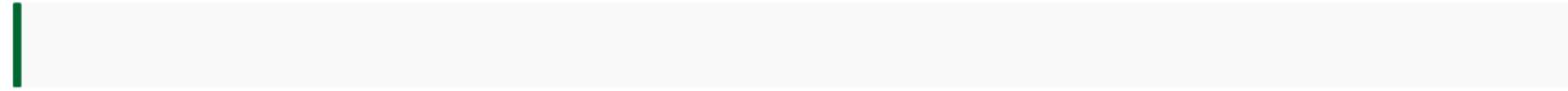
Beneficial outcome



Loyalty



Human dignity



Choose a slide to present

What should you take into consideration - age, family situation, gender, social contribution ... any others?

Which ethical principle is most important?

Garness	1
Beneficial outcome	1
Loyalty	1
Human dignity	1

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

0 Yes      0 No      0 Don't know





Join at [menti.com](https://menti.com) | use code 3537 2409



Menti

Wk 3 ethics



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

Choose a slide to present

What should you take into consideration - age, family situation, genetics, social contribution ... any others?

Which ethical principle is most important?

- Benefit
- Beneficial outcome
- Equality
- Human dignity

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

0 Yes    0 No    0 Don't know

0

Yes

0

No

0

Don't know

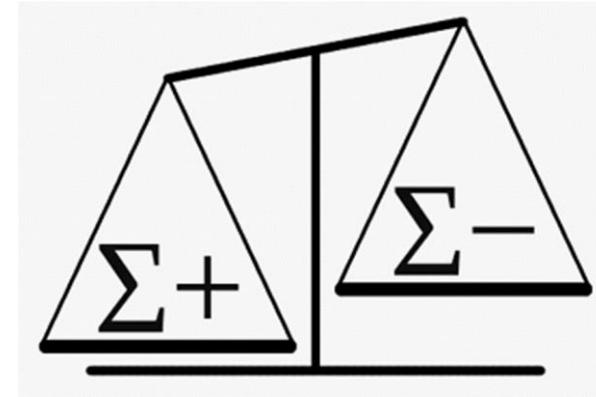


# Ethical Approaches

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.

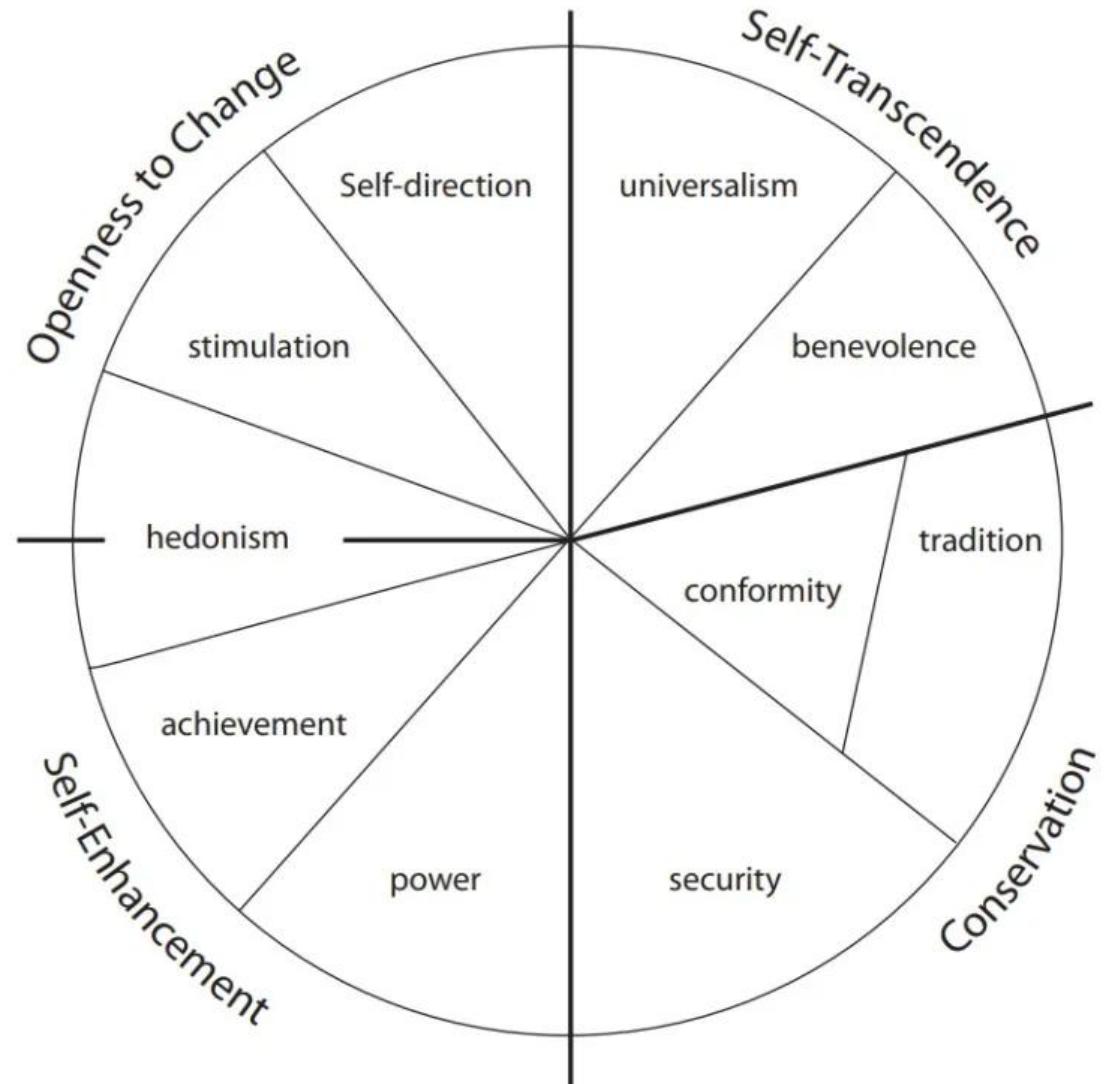
# Schwartz on values

- 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





# 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/>