Ch. 1: Introducing Ethics

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Hello, Ethics students! This is the course reader (“Adventures in Ethics”) for PHIL 1125: Ethics, which combines my (Brendan’s) lecture notes along with a selection of readings. This is still a work in progress, so please let me know if anything is amiss. I hope you have as much reading the material as I had writing and collecting it.

In this introductory chapter, we’ll be taking a look at (1) what we mean by “ethics” and (2) what might be the point of studying it.

-Brendan

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# Ethics and Values

**Ethics** (or **moral philosophy)** can be defined as “the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong.” Here *good* and *bad* have to do with values (“Joan is a *good* person”) while *right* and *wrong* relate to actions (“Murder is wrong”). So, why should anyone care about ethics? This is a tough question, but some common answers include the following. Many important social and political questions can’t be answered without thinking hard about ethics—e.g., about genetic engineering, drone strikes, stockpiling and using weapons of mass destruction, and so on

* A functioning morality is essential to the very *possibility* of having a functioning society. In a world where morality has badly eroded, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes). Less dramatically, societies in which people don’t trust each other to behave moral often have severe problems.
* Morality and ethics impact our personal lives—e.g., when we get angry, are hurt by someone, make commitments, and so on. Ethics also helps us to think about how live right now (our current “morals”) and the way we *aspire* to live. Ethics helps us think more sensibly about the difference between right and wrong, gives us some tools with which to approach moral dilemmas, and helps us address moral conflicts with other people.
* For the vast majority of people (excluding a small number of truly vicious people), morality and ethics actually play a big role in how we think our selves. Most of us want to be *good* people, both in our private lives (with our friends and family) and our public lives (as citizens, employees, students, and so on).

Ethics also addresses the question: Why should I try to live a moral life, and how do I go about this? Unsurprisingly, ethicists haven’t always agreed on the details of this, but there are a number of common themes. **Socrates** argued that ALL people *want* to be ethical, and that they would be happy if they could do it, but they are simply ignorant. So, becoming a better a person is just a matter of study ethics! **Aristotle** (a few generations later than Socrates) emphasized that ethics—as the *study* of morality—can only ever be part of the solution. Aristotle thought that, in order to truly become better people, we need to continually practice being ethical. (More specifically, he thought we needed to actively work on the shortcomings we identified in ourselves during ethical reflection). In China, **Confucius** offered a somewhat similar account of practice-based ethics (though he emphasized slightly different virtues). Both Aristotle and Confucius, unlike Socrates, also seem to grant that it’s possible for people to do the wrong thing even if they “know better.”

## Why be moral? Gyges’ magical ring

In Book 2 of Plato’s *Republic,* a character named Glaucon relates the story of the *Ring of Gyges.* It goes something like this: Gyges was a shepherd, and a pretty typical guy as far as acting morally goes. One day, however, he found a ring that allowed him to become invisible (ala *Lord of the Rings)*. Once he did so, he went on a crime spree: he seduced the queen, murdered the king, and became very, very rich and powerful. Since people didn’t know about his crimes, they loved and praised him, and (because of his large donations to the temples) even the gods liked him (so, he ended up in a pretty good afterlife.). In an effort to play the “Devil’s Advocate,” Glaucon claims the following (I’ve embellished the examples somewhat):

1. Every rational person would behave more-or-less as Gyges did, were they to be put in this situation. That is, once they knew they could *never* be caught, they would act in immoral ways in order to benefit themselves.
2. Every rational person *ought* to act as Gyges did. So, for example, it would be crazy to choose a life where one was really *ethical* but who was thought to be *unethical* (an innocent woman burned at the stake by her own children as a “witch”, who then spends the rest of eternity in an undeserved hell) than a person who was really *unethical* but was thought to be *ethical* (such as Gyges).
3. Gyges view (that that the “right thing to do” is simply to act in one’s own long-term self-interest, regardless of how this affects others) is called **ethical egoism.**

Part of the point of this story is to introduce a distinction between “actions that are good for me, personally” (make me rich, well-liked, and will maybe even get me into heaven) and those that are morally right or wrong.In the *Republic,* Plato goes on to argue that (in the long run), there really isn’t a difference between morality and self-interest, and the everyone would benefit by behaving morally. However, we don’t need to worry (too much) about whether Plato’s argument works. Instead, we have a simpler question: **“What exactly is morality, anyway?”**

**Two senses of *moral:* descriptive and normative.** When we say something is *moral,* we are sometimes simply describing what a person, group, or society BELIEVES about morality (e.g., “Drinking goes against my morals”), regardless of whether we agree with this. This is the **subjective** sense of morality, and is often studied by people such as sociologists. However, we can also be referring to something that is **objectively** morally right and morally wrong, independent of people’s feelings and beliefs (e.g., “Murdering an innocent human being simply is wrong, no matter what Magneto thinks”). When we are using the objective sense of moral, describing something as *moral* typically says that it *is* good or *is* right (e.g., “Logan is a very moral person”; “Lying is immoral”). In normative ethics, when we are trying to figure out what we *ought* to do, we will generally be using the objective sense of moral, unless otherwise noted.

When we use morality in the objective sense, morality is NOT:

* Identical with what is legal/illegal. For example, lying to a friend might be immoral, even though it is perfectly legal. There are also plenty of examples of laws that are immoral (for example, laws that allowed slavery).
* The same as what is **prudential,** or in my best interest. For example, lying to a friend might be immoral even if (1) I could get away with it, and (2) I would (personally) benefit from telling the lies.
* The same as what a particular religion says. Religions disagree about moral issues, and many questions of morality don’t correspond neatly to the sorts of things religions discuss. When we claim that something is objectively morally right/wrong, this is a claim that applies to ALL people, as opposed to people from a certain religion.

**Subdividing the moral realm: Value theory and deontic theory.** The moral realm divides into two parts: value theory and deontic theory. **Value theory** concerns the difference between**good and bad**. This has to do with *values—*properties of things or people. By contrast **deontic theory** has to do with which actions are right or wrong, and with what we should or shouldn’t do.

## The Nature of Values

Our **values** are whatever we consider important, and try to achieve and maintain. Generally speaking, most people have a similar set of moral values (most people agree that we should respect people’s rights, avoid causing them pain, etc.) but different people place different weight on these shared values (and so, people don’t always agree on what the moral thing to do is). In ethics, we say that **value** claims are **normative claims,** in the sense that they relate to some norm or standard about how the world “should” be, and that they generate **prescriptive claims** about what we ought to do (or not do). These can be contrasted with **descriptive claims,** which merely describe how the world *is,* without making a judgment about it. Here’s the basic idea:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Descriptive claim (non-moral)** | **Normative claim (moral)** | **Prescriptive claim (moral)** |
| Most people lie quite a bit, but Gina always tells the truth. | In most circumstances, lying is wrong. | You should be more like Gina, and tell the truth. |
| Henry enjoys playing baseball with frogs. | It is wrong to cause sentient creatures to suffer needlessly. | Henry should stop playing baseball with frogs. |
| 55% of Americans believe that abortion should be legal. | Abortion is morally wrong (or right). | People ought not have abortions (or, it’s permissible to have abortions). |

As the abortion example suggests, people can *disagree* about value claims, which can lead to disagreements about prescriptive claims.

**Foundational vs. Instrumental Values.** Not all values are created equal. For example, there is difference between value claims like “Money is good” or “Hitting people is wrong” from claims like “Happiness is good” or “Suffering is bad.” The former claims are examples of **instrumental values**—money is good *because* it allows you to buy other things you value; hitting people is wrong *because* it hurts them (and violates their rights, etc.). By contrast, claims about happiness/suffering are plausibly examples of **fundamental values.** These things aren’t valuable because of anything else; they are valuable in and of themselves. There are also a variety of things that might be *both* instrumentally and fundamentally valuable. For example, many people value learning new things in and of itself (“fundamentally”) but also because this new knowledge helps them to pursue other goals that they value (“instrumentally”). The same might be said of exercise, sports, etc.

**Ethical Theory and Explaining Value Claims.** In this class, we’ll be talking about a number of **ethical theories** that try to *explain* instrumental moral claims in terms of one or more fundamental values. So, for example, everyone (or almost everyone) would agree that “murder is wrong.” But why is it wrong? Ethical theories give various answers:

1. **Utilitarians** hold that the only fundamental value is happiness (everyone’s happiness; not just yours!). So, they explain the wrongness of murder in terms of how it affects the suffering and lost happiness of the victim (e.g., all the fun things this person will miss out on), their friends and family, and/or society as a whole (after all, murder makes people frightened).
2. Kantian **deontology** hold that a fundamental value involves respecting autonomy (or “self governance) of other people, or the **rights** of others to lead their own lives in the way that they think best. Murder is the ultimate way of taking away someone’s autonomy.
3. **Virtue ethics** locate fundamental value in being (or at least in striving to be) a certain sort of person—e.g., being the sort of person who empathizes with others (and doesn’t murder them!).
4. **Natural law** theory explains instrumental moral values in terms of fundamental non-moral values concerning the *nature* of things (and especially, the nature of human beings). Historically, it has often been linked to religious claims about the origin of humans (e.g., that they were made by God for some purpose or other).
5. **Ethical egoism** (mentioned above) holds that only fundamental value is self-interest. The other theories are defined *in contrast* to this.

While some people adhere strictly to a single ethical theory, others (called **pluralists)** think that different theories work better for different sorts of questions and issues.

## Review Questions

1. What do you hope to get out of your study of ethics (besides getting college credit!)? Trace this all the way back to one or more foundational values.
2. Describe a significant moral problem you’ve encountered. Explain it so others can understand it. What did you do? Why? Would you respond differently to that problem today? Why?
3. Answer these questions in order:
   1. What three to five values are most important to you?
   2. Are any of these moral values? What other types of values are on your list?
   3. Identify whether each of your values is instrumental, foundational, or both.
   4. Finally, what prescriptive claims does each value support?
4. If you were constructing an ethical theory, what foundational value(s) would you base the theory on? Why?

# Do We Have a Moral Duty to Give to “Charity”? Singer on Famine Relief

According to recent World Health Organization statistics, around 5 million children under the age of five die in developing (“poor”) countries each year. More than half of these deaths are preventable, and could have been stopped by relatively cheap, easy-to-deliver interventions: prenatal care for the mother, access to medical staff after birth, clean water, adequate food, antibiotics, malaria nets and medication, and so on. While these statistics show an improvement over 30 years ago, this remains a serious problem. The UN estimates that world hunger and extreme poverty could be solved by spending around $200 billion per year for around 20 years. By comparison, the total GDP of the US, EU, and Japan (the “rich countries”) is well over $30 trillion (or $30,000 billion).

In a famous essay titled “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, Peter Singer argues that these sorts of data mean that most citizens of rich countries are morally *required* to give significant amounts of money and time to helping these people. (He also made versions of this argument in a number of other essays.) He argues that this is not simply “what a charitable person would do” but is instead something that every minimally decent person should be committed to.

## Singer’s Argument: The Strong and the Weak Version

Singer’s argument for his conclusion is actually a very simple one:

I begin with the assumption that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad…My next point is this: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one. It requires us only to prevent what is bad, and not to promote what is good, and it requires this of us only when we can do it without sacrificing anything that is, from the moral point of view, comparably important. I could even, as far as the application of my argument to the Bengal emergency is concerned, qualify the point so as to make it: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it. An application of this principle would be as follows: if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing. // The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive. If it were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed.

* Premise: Suffering and death from the lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
* Premise: (**Strong version**) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening *without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance,* we are morally required to do so.
  + (**Weak version**) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening *without thereby sacrificing anything of any moral importance,* we are morally required to do so.
  + Example: If a baby is drowning in a puddle, and the only you can save it is by walking in and getting your clothes dirty, *you are morally required to do this.*
* Premise: Much of the suffering and death could be prevented by donating money to charitable organizations (such as UNICEF, Oxfam, Save the Children, etc.).
* Conclusion (Strong version): Most citizens of rich countries are morally obligated to donate *all* of their disposable income (beyond that required for food, water, health care, etc.) to “charity.”
  + Conclusion (Weak version) Most citizens of rich countries are morally obligated to donate *significant* amounts of money to these charities. In particular, they should donate *most* or *all* of the money they currently spend on “luxuries” (fancy clothes, expensive restaurants, and so on).

To put it another way: Singer’s argument entails that most Americans are currently behaving immorally. The **strong** version of the argument (which Singer endorses) requires that we give to the point of **marginal utility** (the point at which giving away another dollar would leave me worse off than any potential person I could help). The **weak** version (which Singer mentions because he thinks people will find it more “realistic”) would still require a major change in the way we lead our lives.

## That Can’t Be Right, Can it? Seven Objections

While Singer’s argument is very famous, many people have disagreed with his conclusion. We’ll spend the rest of the class going over some possible objections to Singer. Some of these are brought up in the original article. Others represent common responses offered by philosophers and others.

1. Objection: “I recognize that I ought to give to charities that help people live near me. However, I don’t think I’m morally required to give money to people I’ll never meet, in parts of the world that I’ve never been to.”
   1. Response 1: Before we had things like TV, radios, computers, and so on, this might have been a reasonable stance. (After all, it was pretty difficult to get reliable info about what was happening in other areas of the world, never mind get aid to the people living there.) But this is no longer the case—there are plenty of reliable ways of (1) finding out which people in the world need help and (2) getting money to them.
   2. Response 2: In general, you can do far more good by giving money to famine- or disease-relief organizations than, say, donating to a hospital in a rich country. For example, donating $1,000 to a hospital \*might\* help purchase a new blood pressure cart; giving $1,000 to famine relief can probably save a life.
2. Objection: “Lots of people could give money to save starving children’s lives. They don’t. So I’m not morally required to either.”
   1. Response: The fact that lots of other people are not fulfilling their moral responsibilities doesn’t get you off the hook. After all, if the drowning baby mentioned earlier were surrounded by a crowd of 10 people who were standing around and doing nothing, this wouldn’t make it OK for *you* to do nothing.
3. Objection: “The conclusion disagrees with what the vast, vast majority of people believe they are morally required to do. So, there must be something wrong with it.”
   1. Response 1: Most of these *same* people will agree with Singer’s claim about saving the baby, and about the general moral principle that makes it morally required to save the baby. It’s not his fault that these people contradict themselves.
   2. Response 2: Versions of Singer’s principle have been defended by many famous philosophers and theologians. For example, Thomas Aquinas defended a very similar principle, as have many other Christian/Muslim/Buddhist theologians. Many of them have said basically the same thing Singer did: “Yep, it’s tough to live morally.” While these sorts of principles have never caught on with the “ordinary person,” there are plenty of people who thought they are plausible.
4. Objection: “This principle is unrealistic. There’s no way we could convince people to adopt it. And the result of *trying* to do so would probably lead people to give up on morality altogether. People would just start murdering each other. So, we should just ignore Singer’s argument.”
   1. Response 1: While it’s true that most citizens of rich countries *currently* think this is an unrealistic principle, there’s no reason to think that this couldn’t change. After all, there are many cultures (both historically and currently) in which giving significant amounts of money to charity was considered the “norm,” and those who didn’t do so were considered immoral.
   2. Response 2: Many people already *say* they believe things like this (since Singer’s argument is very close to those endorsed by many religions). So, if we ignore Singer’s argument, we should also ignore all of these religions.
5. Objection: “If everyone in the rich world gave 1% of their income to charity, the problem would be solved! Better yet, the government should just institute a new tax, to make sure everyone did their part. So, I only need to give 1% of my income to charity.”
   1. Response: Yes, if everyone else did their part, you would only be required to give 1%. But we all know that people are not going to do this. We also know that the government is probably not going to do this anytime soon. And it’s not OK to let people die just because you are upset that other Americans aren’t pitching in to do their part.
6. Objection: “If everyone gave huge portions of their money to charity, the US and European economies would fall apart! And that would cause chaos! So, I’m not morally required to give a huge portion of my money to charity.”
   1. Response: It’s true that *if* everyone did this at exactly the same time, then chaos would result. However, there’s no reason to think this will happen. Because of this, there’s every reason to think that you could save substantial numbers of lives by donating lots of money.
7. Objection: “I think giving money to Oxfam/UNICEF/Catholic Charities/The Red Cross won’t help, and might make the problem worse in the long run (for example, by causing the population to continue to grow). I think we should devote money to promoting democracy/fixing global warming/educating the poor/providing birth control/whatever.
   1. Response: OK, do your research and donate a huge chunk of money to whatever strategy you think *will* work. It’s simply not realistic to say “Well, there’s nothing I can do, so I might as well not do anything.”

**Conclusion: No such thing as “supererogatory”?** The strong version of Singer’s argument provides a challenge to a distinction many ethical theorists (particularly deontologists) like to make between **morally neutral, morally obligatory,** and **morally supererogatory** actions. An action is *morally neutral* is it is neither obligatory nor forbidden. An action is *morally obligatory* (or morally required) if you would be immoral for NOT doing it. Finally an action is supererogatory if (a) it would be morally *admirable* for you to do (and thus, it is not morally neutral), but you are not *required* to do it. Many people think that things like “giving to charity” or “volunteering” count as supererogatory. Singer, however, argues that these actions are actually morally required. (He also thinks that citizens of rich countries are morally obligated to adopt vegan diets, for similar reasons—i.e., the pleasure people get from eating meat is outweighed by animals suffering).

## Review Questions

1. Singer’s argument suggests that there is a radical disconnect between the sorts of ethical theories people *say* they follow (including utilitarianism, deontology, Christian-Buddhist-Muslim ethics, etc.) and the way they actually lead their lives. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Give an example of a **luxury item** that you plan to purchase in the next six months. This might be a restaurant meal, a vacation, brand name clothes, a movie ticket, etc. Now, provide an argument that this is morally OK, given that you could donate this money to charity instead. Finally, consider how Singer might criticize your argument.
3. Explain Singer’s argument to someone you know (not in this class). Make sure to explain both Singer’s *conclusion* (donate lots of money) and his *reasons* for thinking this. Now, listen to their response, and try to think of how Singer respond. Provide a description of how this conversation went.

# Reading: The Life You Can Save (By Peter Singer)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**[Brendan: This is an updated version of the argument Singer presents in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (discussed above).]**

## Saving a Child

On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather's cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him, and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do?

I teach a course called Practical Ethics. When we start talking about global poverty, I ask my students what they think you should do in this situation. Predictably, they respond that you should save the child. "What about your shoes? And being late for work?" I ask them. They brush that aside. How could anyone consider a pair of shoes, or missing an hour or two at work, a good reason for not saving a child's life?

In 2007, something resembling this hypothetical situation actually occurred near Manchester, England. Jordon Lyon, a ten-year-old boy, leaped into a pond after his stepsister Bethany slipped in. He struggled to support her but went under himself. Anglers managed to pull Bethany out, but by then Jordon could no longer be seen. They raised the alarm, and two auxiliary policemen soon arrived; they refused to enter the pond to find Jordon. He was later pulled out, but attempts at resuscitation failed. At the inquest on Jordon's death, the policemen's inaction was defended on the grounds that they had not been trained to deal with such situations. The mother responded: "If you're walking down the street and you see a child drowning you automatically go in that water . . . You don't have to be trained to jump in after a drowning child."

I think it's safe to assume that most people would agree with the mother's statement. But consider that, according to UNICEF, nearly 10 million children under five years old die each year from causes related to poverty. Here is just one case, described by a man in Ghana to a researcher from the World Bank:

Take the death of this small boy this morning, for example. The boy died of measles. We all know he could have been cured at the hospital. But the parents had no money and so the boy died a slow and painful death, not of measles but out of poverty.

Think about something like that happening 27,000 times every day. Some children die because they don't have enough to eat. More die, like that small boy in Ghana, from measles, malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia, conditions that either don't exist in developed nations, or, if they do, are almost never fatal. The children are vulnerable to these diseases because they have no safe drinking water, or no sanitation, and because when they do fall ill, their parents can't afford any medical treatment. UNICEF, Oxfam, and many other organizations are working to reduce poverty and provide clean water and basic health care, and these efforts are reducing the toll. If the relief organizations had more money, they could do more, and more lives would be saved.

Now think about your own situation. By donating a relatively small amount of money, you could save a child's life. Maybe it takes more than the amount needed to buy a pair of shoes — but we all spend money on things we don't really need, whether on drinks, meals out, clothing, movies, concerts, vacations, new cars, or house renovation. Is it possible that by choosing to spend your money on such things rather than contributing to an aid agency, you are leaving a child to die, a child you could have saved?

**[Brendan: What do you think of this question—is spending money on things “we don’t need” essentially leaving children to die? Why or why not?]**

## Poverty Today

A few years ago, the World Bank asked researchers to listen to what the poor are saying. They were able to document the experiences of 60,000 women and men in seventy-three countries. Over and over, in different languages and on different continents, poor people said that poverty meant these things:

* You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child's hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.
* You can't save money. If a family member falls ill and you need money to see a doctor, or if the crop fails and you have nothing to eat, you have to borrow from a local moneylender and he will charge you so much interest at the debt continues to mount and you may never be free of it.
* You can't afford to send your children to school, or if they do start school, you have to take them out again if the harvest is poor.
* You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch that you need to rebuild every two or three years, or after severe weather.
* You have no nearby source of safe drinking water. You have to carry your water a long way, and even then, it can make you ill unless you boil it.

But extreme poverty is not only a condition of unsatisfied material needs. It is often accompanied by a degrading state of powerlessness. Even in countries that are democracies and are relatively well governed, respondents to the World Bank survey described a range of situations in which they had to accept humiliation without protest. If someone takes what little you have, and you complain to the police, they may not listen to you. Nor will the law necessarily protect you from rape or sexual harassment. You have a pervading sense of shame and failure because you cannot provide for your children. Your poverty traps you, and you lose hope of ever escaping from a life of hard work for which, at the end, you will have nothing to show beyond bare survival.

The World Bank defines **extreme poverty** as not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education. Many people are familiar with the statistic that one billion people are living on less than one dollar per day. That was the World Bank's poverty line until 2008, when better data on international price comparisons enabled it to make a more accurate calculation of the amount people need to meet their basic needs. On the basis of this calculation, the World Bank set the poverty line at $1.25 per day. The number of people whose income puts them under this line is not 1 billion but 1.4 billion. That there are more people living in extreme poverty than we thought is, of course, bad news, but the news is not all bad. On the same basis, in 1981 there were 1.9 billion people living in extreme poverty. That was about four in every ten people on the planet, whereas now fewer than one in four are extremely poor.

South Asia is still the region with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, a total of 600 million, including 455 million in India. Economic growth has, however, reduced the proportion of South Asians living in extreme poverty from 60 percent in 1981 to 42 percent in 2005. There are another 380 million extremely poor people in sub-Saharan Africa, where half the population is extremely poor — and that is the same percentage as in 1981. The most dramatic reduction in poverty has been in East Asia, although there are still more than 200 million extremely poor Chinese, and smaller numbers elsewhere in the region. The remaining extremely poor people are distributed around the world, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

In response to the "$1.25 a day" figure, the thought may cross your mind that in many developing countries, it is possible to live much more cheaply than in the industrialized nations. Perhaps you have even done it yourself, backpacking around the world, living on less than you would have believed possible. So you may imagine that this level of poverty is less extreme than it would be if you had to live on that amount of money in the United States, or any industrialized nation. If such thoughts did occur to you, you should banish them now, because the World Bank has already made the adjustment in purchasing power: Its figures refer to the number of people existing on a daily total consumption of goods and services — whether earned or home-grown — comparable to the amount of goods and services that can be bought in the United States for $1.25.

In wealthy societies, most poverty is **relative.** People feel poor because many of the good things they see advertised on television are beyond their budget — but they do have a television. In the United States, 97 percent of those classified by the Census Bureau as poor own a color TV. Three quarters of them own a car. Three quarters of them have air conditioning. Three quarters of them have a VCR or DVD player. All have access to health care. I am not quoting these figures in order to deny that the poor in the United States face genuine difficulties. Nevertheless, for most, these difficulties are of a different order than those of the world's poorest people. The 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty are poor by an absolute standard tied to the most basic human needs. They are likely to be hungry for at least part of each year. Even if they can get enough food to fill their stomachs, they will probably be malnourished because their diet lacks essential nutrients. In children, malnutrition stunts growth and can cause permanent brain damage. The poor may not be able to afford to send their children to school. Even minimal health care services are usually beyond their means.

[**Brendan: How does “extreme poverty” compare with being “poor” in a rich country like the US? How might this be relevant for morality, and for how we choose to spend our time/money?]**

# Reading: Cheeseburger Ethics (by Eric Schwitzgebel)[[2]](#footnote-2)

**[Brendan: This article explores the question: “Does studying ethics (or related subjects such as religion) make you behave more ethically?” Before reading it, what do you think? Do you hope/expect that thinking more about ethics this semester will make you a better person? Why or why not?]**

None of the classic questions of philosophy are beyond a seven-year-old’s understanding. If God exists, why do bad things happen? How do you know there’s still a world on the other side of that closed door? Are we just made of material stuff that will turn into mud when we die? If you could get away with killing and robbing people just for fun, would you? The questions are natural. It’s the answers that are hard.

Eight years ago, I’d just begun a series of empirical studies on the moral behaviour of professional ethicists. My son Davy, then seven years old, was in his booster seat in the back of my car. ‘What do you think, Davy?’ I asked. ‘People who think a lot about what’s fair and about being nice – do they behave any better than other people? Are they more likely to be fair? Are they more likely to be nice?”

Davy didn’t respond right away. I caught his eye in the rearview mirror.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

‘The kids who always talk about being fair and sharing,’ I recall him saying, ‘mostly just want you to be fair to them and share with them.’

When I meet an ethicist for the first time – by ‘ethicist’, I mean a professor of philosophy who specialises in teaching and researching ethics – it’s my habit to ask whether ethicists behave any differently to other types of professor. Most say no.

I’ll probe further: why not? Shouldn’t regularly thinking about ethics have some sort of influence on one’s own behaviour? Doesn’t it seem that it would?

To my surprise, few professional ethicists seem to have given the question much thought. They’ll toss out responses that strike me as flip or are easily rebutted, and then they’ll have little to add when asked to clarify. They’ll say that academic ethics is all about abstract problems and bizarre puzzle cases, with no bearing on day-to-day life – a claim easily shown to be false by a few examples: Aristotle on virtue, Kant on lying, Singer on charitable donation. They’ll say: ‘What, do you expect epistemologists to have more knowledge? Do you expect doctors to be less likely to smoke?’ I’ll reply that the empirical evidence does suggest that doctors are less likely to smoke than non-doctors of similar social and economic background. Maybe epistemologists don’t have more knowledge, but I’d hope that specialists in feminism would exhibit less sexist behaviour – and if they didn’t, that would be an interesting finding. I’ll suggest that relationships between professional specialisation and personal life might play out differently for different cases.

It seems odd to me that our profession has so little to say about this matter. We criticise Martin Heidegger for his Nazism, and we wonder how deeply connected his Nazism was to his other philosophical views. But we don’t feel the need to turn the mirror on ourselves.

The same issues arise with clergy. In 2010, I was presenting some of my work at the Confucius Institute for Scotland. Afterward, I was approached by not one but two bishops. I asked them whether they thought that clergy, on average, behaved better, the same or worse than laypeople.

‘About the same,’ said one.

‘Worse!’ said the other.

No clergyperson has ever expressed to me the view that clergy behave on average morally better than laypeople, despite all their immersion in religious teaching and ethical conversation. Maybe in part this is modesty on behalf of their profession. But in most of their voices, I also hear something that sounds like genuine disappointment, some remnant of the young adult who had headed off to seminary hoping it would be otherwise.

In a series of empirical studies – mostly in collaboration with the philosopher Joshua Rust of Stetson University – I have empirically explored the moral behaviour of ethics professors. As far as I’m aware, Josh and I are the only people ever to have done so in a systematic way.

Here are the measures we looked at: voting in public elections, calling one’s mother, eating the meat of mammals, donating to charity, littering, disruptive chatting and door-slamming during philosophy presentations, responding to student emails, attending conferences without paying registration fees, organ donation, blood donation, theft of library books, overall moral evaluation by one’s departmental peers based on personal impressions, honesty in responding to survey questions, and joining the Nazi party in 1930s Germany.

Obviously some of these measures are more significant than others. They range from comparative trivialities (littering) to substantial life decisions (joining the Nazis), and from contributions to strangers (blood donation) to personal interactions (calling Mom). Some of our measures rely on self-report (we didn’t ask ethicists’ mothers how long it had *really* been).

Ethicists do not behave better. But neither, overall, do they seem to behave worse

The majority, however, were directly observational or involved peer testimony or archival data. In several cases we had both self-reports and more objective data. For example, we were able to compare philosophers’ self-reported voting rates with state records showing whether and how often they had actually voted. We found no evidence that ethicists’ self-reports of their behaviour were either more or less accurate than other groups’ self-reports.

Ethicists do not appear to behave better. Never once have we found ethicists as a whole behaving better than our comparison groups of other professors, by any of our main planned measures. But neither, overall, do they seem to behave worse. (There are some mixed results for secondary measures.) For the most part, ethicists behave no differently from professors of any other sort – logicians, chemists, historians, foreign-language instructors.

Nonetheless, ethicists do embrace more stringent moral norms on some issues, especially vegetarianism and charitable donation. Our results on vegetarianism were particularly striking. In a survey of professors from five US states, we found that 60 per cent of ethicist respondents rated ‘regularly eating the meat of mammals, such as beef or pork’ somewhere on the ‘morally bad’ side of a nine-point scale ranging from ‘very morally bad’ to ‘very morally good’. By contrast, only 19 per cent of non-philosophy professors rated it as bad. That’s a pretty big difference of opinion! Non-ethicist philosophers were intermediate, at 45 per cent. But when asked later in the survey whether they had eaten the meat of a mammal at their last evening meal, we found no statistically significant difference in the groups’ responses – about 38 per cent of professors from all groups reported having done so (including 37 per cent of ethicists).

Similarly for charitable donation. In the same survey, we asked respondents what percentage of income, if any, the typical professor should donate to charity, and then later we asked what percentage of income they personally had given in the previous calendar year. Ethicists espoused the most stringent norms: their average recommendation was 7 per cent, compared with 5 per cent for the other two groups. However, ethicists did not report having given a greater percentage of income to charity than the non-philosophers (4 per cent for both groups). Nor did adding a charitable incentive to half of our surveys (a promise of a $10 donation to their selected charity from a list) increase ethicists’ likelihood of completing the survey. Interestingly, the non-ethicist philosophers, though they reported having given the least to charity (3 per cent), were the only group that responded to our survey at detectably higher rates when given the charitable incentive.

**[Brendan: Why do you think that these particular issues—vegetarianism and charitable donation—were the ones on which people who studied ethics had different beliefs from everyone else? And given this, why didn’t they act on them?\**

Should we expect ethicists to behave especially morally well as a result of their training – or at least more in accord with the moral norms that they themselves espouse?

Perhaps we can defend a ‘no’. Consider this thought experiment:

An ethics professor teaches Peter Singer’s arguments for vegetarianism to her undergraduates. She says she finds those arguments sound and that in her view it is morally wrong to eat meat. Class ends, and she goes to the cafeteria for a cheeseburger. A student approaches her and expresses surprise at her eating meat. (If you don’t like vegetarianism as an issue, another example could serve: marital fidelity, charitable donation, fiscal honesty, courage in defence of the weak.)

‘Why are you surprised?’ asks our ethicist. ‘Yes, it is morally wrong for me to enjoy this delicious cheeseburger. However, I don’t aspire to be a saint. I aspire only to be about as morally good as others around me. Look around this cafeteria. Almost everyone else is eating meat. Why should I sacrifice this pleasure, wrong though it is, while others do not? Indeed, it would be unfair to hold me to higher standards just because I’m an ethicist. I am paid to teach, research and write, like every other professor. I am paid to apply my scholarly talents to evaluating intellectual arguments about the good and bad, the right and wrong. If you want me also to live as a role model, you ought to pay me extra!

‘Furthermore,’ she continues, ‘if we demand that ethicists live according to the norms they espouse, that will put major distortive pressures on the field. An ethicist who feels obligated to live as she teaches will be motivated to avoid highly self-sacrificial conclusions, such as that the wealthy should give most of their money to charity or that we should eat only a restricted subset of foods. Disconnecting professional ethicists’ academic enquiries from their personal choices allows them to consider the arguments in a more even-handed way. If no one expects us to act in accord with our scholarly opinions, we are more likely to arrive at the moral truth.’

‘In that case,’ replies the student, ‘is it morally okay for me to order a cheeseburger too?’

‘Thomas Jefferson was a great man. He had the courage to recognise that his own lifestyle was morally odious’

‘No! Weren’t you listening? It would be wrong. It’s wrong for me, also, as I just admitted. I recommend the avocado and sprouts. I hope that Singer’s and my arguments help create a culture permanently free of the harms to animals and the environment that are caused by meat-eating.’

‘This reminds me of Thomas Jefferson’s attitude toward slave ownership,’ I imagine the student replying. Maybe the student is black.

‘Perhaps so. Jefferson was a great man. He had the courage to recognise that his own lifestyle was morally odious. He acknowledged his mediocrity and resisted the temptation to try to paper over things with shoddy arguments. Here, have a fry.’

Let’s call this view ***cheeseburger ethics*.**

**[Brendan: How does cheeseburger ethics compare to Singer’s view? Does the argument for cheeseburger ethics convince you?]**

Any of us could easily become much morally better than we are, if we chose to. For those of us who are affluent by global standards, the path is straightforward: spend less on luxuries and give the savings to a good cause. Even if you are not affluent by global standards, unless you are on the precipice of ruin, you could give more of your time to helping others. It’s not difficult to see multiple ways, every day, in which one could be kinder to those who would especially benefit from kindness.

And yet, most of us choose **moral mediocrity** instead. It’s not that we try but fail, or that we have good excuses. We – most of us – actually aim at mediocrity. The cheeseburger ethicist is perhaps only unusually honest with herself about this. We aspire to be about as morally good as our peers. If others cheat and get away with it, we want to do the same. We don’t want to suffer for goodness while others laughingly gather the benefits of vice. If the morally good life is uncomfortable and unpleasant, if it involves repeated painful sacrifices that are not compensated in some way, sacrifices that others are not also making, then we don’t want it.

Recent empirical work in moral psychology, especially by Robert B Cialdini, professor emeritus at Arizona State University, seems to confirm this general tendency. People are more likely to comply with norms that they see others following, less likely to comply with norms when they see others violating them. Also, empirical research on ‘moral self-licensing’ suggests that people who act well on one occasion use that as an excuse to act less well on a subsequent one. We gaze around us, then aim for so-so.

**[Brendan: What do you think of the idea that most of us aim for “moral mediocrity” rather than “moral excellenc”?]**

What, in that case, is moral reflection good for? Here’s one thought. Perhaps it gives us the power to calibrate more precisely toward our chosen level of moral mediocrity. I sit on the couch, resting while my wife cleans up from dinner. I know that it would be morally better to help than to continue relaxing. But how bad, exactly, would it be for me not to help? Pretty bad? Only a little bad? Not at all bad, but also not as good as I would like to be if I weren’t feeling so lazy? These are the questions that occupy my mind. In most cases, we already know what is good. No special effort or skill is required to figure that out. Much more interesting and practical is the question of how far short of the ideal we are comfortable being.

Suppose it’s generally true that we aim for goodness only by relative, rather than absolute, standards. What, then, should we expect to be the effect of discovering, say, that it is morally bad to eat meat, as the majority of US ethicists seem to think? If you’re trying to be only about as good as others, and no better, then you can keep enjoying the cheeseburgers. Your behaviour might not change much at all. What would change is this: you would acquire a lower opinion of (almost) everyone’s behaviour, your own included.

You might hope that others will change. You might advocate general societal change – but you’ll have no desire to go first. Like Jefferson maybe.

I’m aiming for B+ on the great moral curve of white middle-class college-educated North Americans. Let others get the As

I was enjoying dinner in an expensive restaurant with an eminent ethicist, at the end of an ethics conference. I tried these ideas out on him.

‘B+,’ he said. ‘That’s what I’m aiming for.’

I thought, but did not say, *B+ sounds good*. Maybe that’s what I’m aiming for, too. B+ on the great moral curve of white middle-class college-educated North Americans. Let others get the As.

Then I thought, most of us who are aiming for B+ will probably fall well short of that. You know, because we fool ourselves. Here I am, away from my children again, at a well-funded conference in a beautiful $200-a-night hotel, mainly, I suspect, so that I can nurture and enjoy my rising prestige as a philosopher. What kind of person am I? What kind of father? B+?

(Oh, it’s excusable! – I hear myself saying. I’m a model of career success for the kids, and of independence. And morality isn’t so demanding. And my philosophical work is a contribution to the general social good. And I give, um, well, a little to charity, so that makes up for it. And I’d be too disheartened if I couldn’t do this kind of thing, which would make me worse as a father and as a teacher of ethics. Plus, I owe it to myself. And… Wow, how neatly what I want to do fits with what’s ethically best, once I think about it!)

Most of the ancient philosophers and the great moral visionaries of the religious wisdom traditions, East and West, would find the cheeseburger ethicist strange. Most of them assumed that the main purpose of studying ethics was self-improvement. Most of them also accepted that philosophers were to be judged by their actions as much as by their words. A great philosopher was, or should be, a role model: a breathing example of a life well-lived. Socrates taught as much by drinking the hemlock as by any of his dialogues, Confucius by his personal correctness, Siddhartha Gautama by his renunciation of wealth, Jesus by washing his disciples’ feet. Socrates does not say: ethically, the right thing for me to do would be to drink this hemlock, but I will flee instead! (Maybe he could have said this, but then he would have been a different sort of model.)

I’d be suspicious of any 21st-century philosopher who offered up her- or himself as a model of wise living. This is no longer what it is to be a philosopher – and those who regard themselves as wise are in any case almost always mistaken. Still, I think, the ancient philosophers got something right that the cheeseburger ethicist gets wrong.

Maybe it’s this: I have available to me the best attempts of earlier generations to express their ethical understanding of the world. I even seem to have some advantages over ancient philosophers, in that there are now many more generations who have left written texts and several distinct cultures with long traditions of written philosophy that I can compare. And I am paid, quite handsomely by global standards, to devote a large portion of my time to thinking through this material. What shall I do with this amazing opportunity? Use it to get some publications and earn praise from my peers, as well as a higher salary? Sure. Use it – as my seven-year-old son observed – as a tool to badger others into treating me better? Okay, I guess so, sometimes. Use it to try to shape other people’s behaviour in a way that will make the world a generally better place? Simply enjoy its power and beauty for its own sake? Yes, those things too.

But also, it seems a waste not to try to use it to make myself a little ethically better than I currently am. Part of what I find unnerving about the cheeseburger ethicist is that she seems so comfortable with her mediocrity, so uninterested in deploying her philosophical tools toward self-improvement. Presumably, if approached in the right way, the great traditions of moral philosophy have the potential to help us become morally better people. But in cheeseburger ethics, that potential is cast aside.

The cheeseburger ethicist risks intellectual failure as well. Real engagement with a philosophical doctrine probably requires taking some steps toward living it. The person who takes, or at least tries to take, personal steps toward Kantian scrupulous honesty, or Mozian impartiality, or Buddhist detachment, or Christian compassion, gains a kind of practical insight into those doctrines that is not easily achieved through intellectual reflection alone. A full-bodied understanding of ethics requires some living.

What’s more, abstract doctrines lack specific content if they aren’t tacked down in a range of concrete examples. Consider the doctrine ‘treat everyone as moral equals who are worthy of respect’. What counts as adhering to this norm, and what constitutes a violation of it? Only when we understand how norms play out across examples do we really understand them. Living our norms, or trying to live them, forces a maximally concrete confrontation with examples. Does your ethical vision really require that you free the slaves on which your lifestyle crucially depends? Does it require giving away your salary and never again enjoying an expensive dessert? Does it require drinking the hemlock if your fellow citizens unjustly demand that you do so?

**[Brendan: How would you describe the argument against “cheeseburger ethics” in your own words? Do you think it works?]**

Few professional ethicists really are cheeseburger ethicists, I think, when they stop to consider it. We do want our ethical reflections to improve us morally, a little bit. But here’s the catch: we aim only to become *a little* morally better. We cut ourselves slack when we look at others around us. We grade ourselves on a curve and aim for B+ rather than A. And at the same time, we excel at rationalisation and excuse-making – maybe more so, the more ethical theories we have ready to hand. So we end, on average, about where we began, behaving more or less the same as others of our social group.

Should we aim for ‘A+’, then? Being frank with myself, I don’t want the self-sacrifice I’m pretty sure would be involved in that. Should I aim at least a little higher than B+? Shall I resolutely aim to be morally far better than my peers – A or maybe A- – even if not quite a saint? I worry that needing to see myself as unusually morally excellent is as likely to increase self-deception, rationalisation, and licensing as to actually improve me.

Shall I redouble my efforts to be kinder and more generous, coupling them with reminders of humility about my likelihood of success? Yes, I will – today! But I already feel my resentment building, and I haven’t done anything yet. Maybe I can escape that resentment by adjusting my sense of ‘mediocrity’ upward. I might try to recalibrate by surrounding myself with like-minded peers in virtue. But avoiding the company of those I deem morally inferior seems more characteristic of the moralising jerk than of the genuinely morally good person, and the history of efforts to establish ethically unified organisations is discouraging.

I can’t quite see my way forward. But now I worry that this, too, is excuse-making. Nothing will assure success, so (phew!) I can comfortably stay in the same old mediocre place I’m accustomed to. Such defeatism also fits nicely with one natural way to read Josh Rust’s and my data: since ethicists don’t behave better or worse than others, philosophical reflection must be behaviourally inert, taking us only where we were already headed, its power mainly that of providing different words by which to decorate our pre-determined choices. So I’m not to be blamed if all my ethical philosophising has not improved me.

I reject that view. Instead, I favour this less comfortable idea: **philosophical reflection does have the power to move us, but it is not a tame thing. It takes us where we don’t intend or expect, sometimes one way, as often the other, sometimes amplifying our vices and illusions, sometimes giving real insight and inspiring substantial moral change.** These tendencies cross-cut and cancel in complex ways that are difficult to detect empirically. If we could tell in advance which direction our reflection would carry us and how, we’d be implementing a set educational technique rather than challenging ourselves philosophically.

Genuine philosophical thinking critiques its prior strictures, including even the assumption that we ought to be morally good. It damages almost as often as it aids, is free, wild and unpredictable, always breaks its harness. It will take you somewhere, up, down, sideways – you can’t know in advance. But you are responsible for trying to go in the right direction with it, and also for your failure when you don’t get there.

**[Brendan: This is a bit abstract! In your own words what would it mean if we approached philosophy/ethics/religion in this way?]**

# Case Study: Clothing of Calamity (Ethics Bowl)

*From: Parr Center for Ethics, NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2020-2021 National Competition.*

Throughout Africa, the primary source of textile goods (especially clothing) is secondhand imports from the United States and other Western countries. Rwanda, and some other African nations, have decided to ban imported secondhand clothing. There are two primary reasons for this: (1) they want to protect their own developing textile industries and (2) they argue that the pervasiveness of secondhand clothing compromises the dignity of the Rwandan people.[[3]](#footnote-3) Because Rwandans can buy imported secondhand clothes for so cheap, or even receive them for free, it has been impossible for the Rwandan textile industry to flourish. In fact, the importing of secondhand clothes is often cited as the reason that textile industries in East Africa collapsed in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, Ghana lost 80% of its textile-related jobs between 1975 and 2000 while Kenya had 500,000 textile industry jobs in the 1970s, it now has only 20,000.[[4]](#footnote-4) A flourishing textile industry is an important part of economic development because it would create jobs and a revenue stream that Rwanda’s economy badly needs.

In addition, the Rwandan government argues that the Rwandan people’s reliance on secondhand clothing compromises their dignity. Throughout East Africa there are names for used clothing from Western countries. For example, in Kenya, people call them “clothes of dead white people” and in Mozambique they call them the “clothing of calamity.” Clare Akamanzi, the CEO of Rwanda Development Board argues that the Rwandan government is looking out for its people. She says, “our citizens deserve better than becoming the recipients of discarded clothes from the western world. This is about the dignity of our people.”3 In addition, there is a worry that the dignity of the country itself (not just the people who wear secondhand clothing) is compromised because of its dependency on Western countries.

In 2017 Rwanda raised import taxes on second hand clothing to such a high level that it functionally created a ban. The tax went from $0.20 per kilo to $2.50 per kilo and eventually to $4 per kilo. But the United States relies heavily on Rwanda and other East African countries as a place to offload its overabundance of used clothing. As such the United States threatened to remove Rwanda from a preferential trade deal, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act. This trade deal was originally created to help lift countries in sub-Saharan African out of poverty. However, the trade deal was also beneficial to the United States and the White House had the legal right to end the deal if it ended up no longer being beneficial. Rwandan leaders, though, argued that this was a form of coercion and that they were being punished for looking out for their own people. To be clear, there are important questions here about morality that are distinct from political rights. For example, there is no question that the United States did have the legal right to leave a trade agreement that no longer benefitted them, but that is a different question from whether the United States should do this, especially given the fact that they have dramatically more political and economic power than Rwanda.

## Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of obligations do nations have to each other? Are these obligations affected by things like economic, political, or military power?
2. Are countries obligated to create trade policies (and other kinds of policies) that are fair, or is it morally permissible for countries to seek whatever advantage they can?
3. Does the United States, because of its unique military and economic resources, have special responsibilities to poorer nations?

# Case Study: Sleeping on Homelessness (Ethics Bowl)

*From: Parr Center for Ethics, NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2020-2021 National Competition.*

Many urban areas have implemented hostile architecture to their cities.[[5]](#footnote-5) Hostile architecture are architectural designs that prevent certain uses of those spaces--like spikes under overhangs (to prevent sitting or sleeping on the ground), studs on flat surfaces (to prevent skateboarding), benches that are segmented or sloped (to prevent sleeping on the bench), or subtle high pitched noises (to prevent young people from loitering).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some private business owners use hostile architecture to prevent homeless individuals from sleeping in front of their storefront so as to promote order and cleanliness around the store. Private business owners may worry that having a homeless individual in their storefront may discourage business, as shoppers feel uncomfortable or unsafe around them. Because homeless populations are often associated with crime, they may also implement hostile architecture to protect their property values. Additionally, having individuals live outside in public places takes a toll on the upkeep of these public places. By implementing hostile architecture, cities may cut back on costs needed to address the consequences from individuals living outside.

Hostile architecture is often criticized for being a “quick fix” to a problem that does not have any quick fixes. Homeless individuals need safe housing. As such, cities cannot rely on hostile architecture for managing homelessness because it does not solve the underlying problem. Instead, it reduces access to places for sleep that are covered or elevated. Critics of hostile architecture argue that it decreases the welfare of the homeless and distracts from other necessary policies (like increased funding to homeless shelters). In addition, critics argue that cities and businesses that use hostile architecture do not treat homeless individuals with dignity. For example, benches in public parks are an important tool for some homeless individuals to get comfortable sleep at night. By unnecessarily adding a slope to the bench, the city reduces the usefulness of the bench for everyone (who wants to sit on an uncomfortable bench?) solely to be sure that this public bench cannot be used by the homeless.

Many people have found ways to make hostile architecture less hostile. For example by placing mattresses or cushions over spikes. Additionally, there have been social media movements seeking to spread awareness about hostile architecture. Some uses of social media are benign, such as petitions. But some uses are more questionable. For example, there are Youtube videos that teach people how to remove skateboard studs from concrete.

## Discussion Questions

1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in homelessness. Does the moral permissibility of hostile architecture change in circumstances like these?
2. Hostile architecture can be used to prevent homeless individuals from sleeping in certain places or to prevent skateboarding. Is the moral permissibility of hostile architecture different when it is used for different purposes?
3. Is it ever morally permissible to illegally destroy hostile architecture (e.g., removing studs)?

# Case Study: Universal Basic Income (Ethics Bowl)[[7]](#footnote-7)

The idea of a **universal basic income (UBI)** policy has been proposed in many different forms. At its most basic, it consists in a guaranteed stipend provided by the state to its citizenry.[[8]](#footnote-8) Proposals for UBI have recently regained political traction as economies face a new kind of industrial revolution, which continues to change the labor market landscape at unprecedented rates. Proponents of UBI proposals often argue that with work automation cutting entire labor markets, new jobs cannot be created quickly enough to replace those lost and that laid off workers cannot gain the new skills necessary to make them competitive in the new job landscape while looking for a new position. In the United States, a proposal for UBI has been most notably defended by former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang. Yang’s proposal would guarantee an unrestricted $1,000 monthly stipend, which he calls a “Freedom Dividend,” to every U.S. citizen over 18 years of age. To support the proposal, Yang contends that 1 in 3 Americans is at risk of losing their job within 12 years, and that UBI would give them a chance to both remain afloat and gain the skills necessary to reenter the job market without being haunted by the fear of absolute poverty.[[9]](#footnote-9) This proposal would be paid for by assessing a new value-added tax, and would replace some existing social welfare programs with UBI by giving program recipients a choice between the two plans.

Many economists support, or have supported UBI, including staunch anti-welfare advocates like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Hayek argued that a minimum income floor was a necessary condition for modern life, while Friedman proposed a ‘negative income tax’, providing enough to survive on but low enough to serve as an incentive to strive for more. Both of these economists, as well as those who follow their schools of thought, believed that UBI should completely replace the social welfare program, unlike many of the plans until now implemented.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Perhaps the best known among UBI policy experimentation is a pilot program conducted in Finland between January 2017 and December 2018. The Finnish government supplied unemployed citizens with the equivalent of $634/ month, with the objective of determining whether such a safeguard would help recipients find jobs. The results were notably inconclusive: The unemployment rate was the same as the control group that did not receive the cash transfer, but the beneficiaries did show a marked increase in happiness. Critics of the program argue that its goal was skewed to begin with, but its results remain valid.[[11]](#footnote-11) The long-term effects of UBI also remain unproven, as most experiments undertaken thus far last no longer than the one conducted in Finland.

Both critics and proponents of UBI make arguments based on fairness as well. Proponents argue that a minimum income, or, more specifically, an unconditional one, would provide a basic level of autonomy for every individual in society to pursue their goals without the fear of poverty, and even provide a safety net to take more economic risks. Critics, argue that society’s allocating unconditional income to people who make no effort to receive it is fundamentally unfair to those who produce the economic value from which the funds for UBI would be redistributed.[[12]](#footnote-12)

## Discussion Questions

1. Is an unconditionally-guaranteed income unfair to those who have been economically successful? Why or why not?
2. Would specifying conditions for UBI make a moral difference in terms of fairness? If so, what conditions should be implemented?

1. Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (Random House, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eric Schwitzgebel, “How Often Do Ethics Professors Call Their Mothers?,” Aeon, July 14, 2015, https://aeon.co/essays/how-often-do-ethics-professors-call-their-mothers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.nytimes.com./2017/10/12/world/africa/east-africa-rwanda-used-clothing.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/politics-hand-clothes-debate-dignity-181005075525265.html 3 https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/politics-hand-clothes-debate-dignity-181005075525265.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/nyregion/hostile-architecture-nyc.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.vice.com/en/article/kzm53n/photos-of-the-most-egregious-anti-homeless-architecture [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This case was previously included in the 2020 NHSEB National Case Set, but was not ultimately used due to the cancelation of the 2020 Nationals during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://basicincome.org/basic-income/history/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.yang2020.com/what-is-freedom-dividend-faq/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-02-19/universal-basic-income-wasn-t-invented-by-today-s-democrats [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47169549 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.pressenza.com/2018/07/philippe-van-parijs-the-biggest-objection-to-a-basic-income-is-moral/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)