

**Part 1****Theoretical Underpinnings of Ethics**

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**Part 2****Moral Reasoning &  
Professional Ethics**

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**Late last night, when you were parking your car, you happened to bump into a car in front of you. You noticed that you had dented the bumper on that car.**

When this happened, what thoughts went through your mind?  
There is an ethical dimension to your thought process here.

If you ignore the ethical dimension, what – in general terms – are you ignoring? Can you generalise this, so that you can identify what it is that makes an ethical consideration an ethical consideration?

**A (maybe the) hallmark of ethical thinking**

*recognition that there are appropriate  
interests other than your own, that  
should act as constraints on unbridled  
pursuit of self-interest*

**Exercise concerning bumping your  
car into someone else's.**

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Thinking here is focussed on  
answering the question,

**What should I do?**

### No.1 Practical Problem of Moral Reasoning

When it comes to matters of ethics, probably the most important practical problem is how to turn an erstwhile ethical problem into a non-ethical one.

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If interests coincide – or can be made to coincide – then there's no ethical problem.

**What are the four or five most important ethical characteristics possessed by someone you greatly admire.**

### Amazing Coincidence

Dispelling the significance of *relativism*

**Honesty**

**Integrity**

**Fairness**

**Compassion (caring)**

**Openness**

### Relativism:

Values are different. They are relative to, for example, cultures, times, places, individuals.

- descriptive relativism: a matter of fact – it's what goes on, culture-to-culture.

Even if descriptive relativism were a matter of fact, it alone would not establish

- normative relativism:
  - ❖ (a) the different views are all equally correct, and
  - ❖ (b) we oughtn't to interfere or judge other cultures' values

Exercise concerning identification of important moral characteristics.

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Thinking here is focussed on answering the question,

What kind of person should I be?

Exercise concerning bumping your car into someone else's.

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Thinking here is focussed on answering the question,

What should I do?

### Descriptive Ethics

Investigates what people do, and what they think are the right things to do. "As a matter of fact, this is what they **do** think."

### Prescriptive Ethics

Reaches a view about what **ought** to be done, and how people **should** behave.

### Descriptive Ethics

Describes behaviour

= anthropology,  
sociology

### Prescriptive Ethics

Normative Ethics  
(principles)



Normative Issues



Casuistry, Moralising

He should not have taken  
the money,

judgment

**because** that was stealing,  
and stealing is wrong

rationale – reasons that  
involve appeal to  
(application of) some  
principle

**because** it causes great  
unhappiness.

Generalisable (appeal to  
principle): 'Whatever causes  
great unhappiness is wrong.'

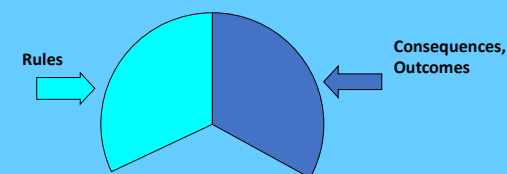
What makes moral reasoning so  
difficult?

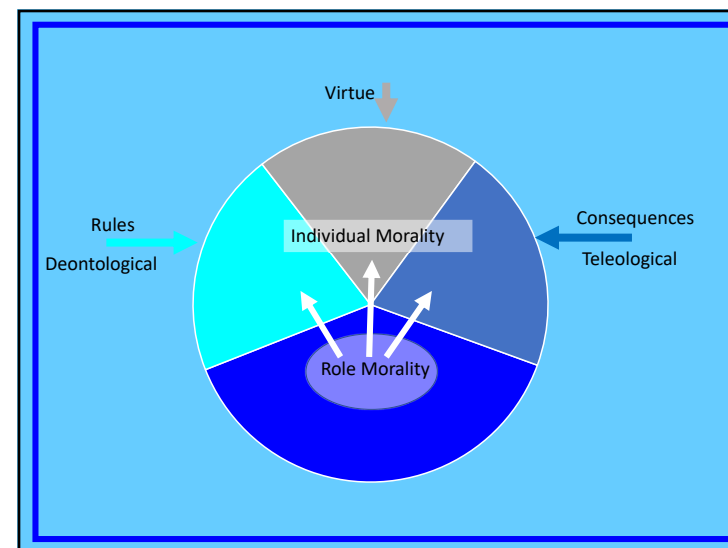
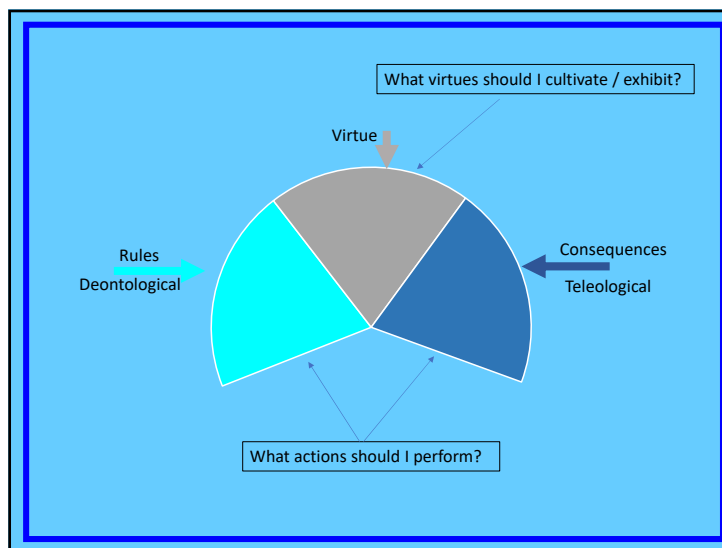
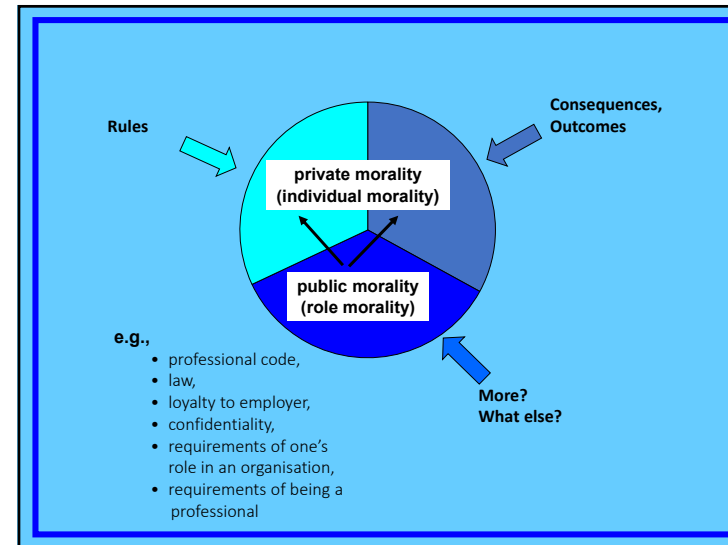
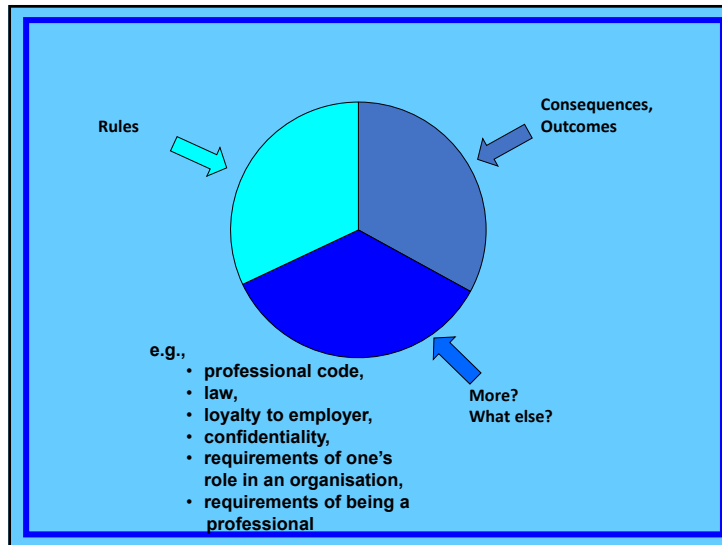
## Moral = Ethical

vs.

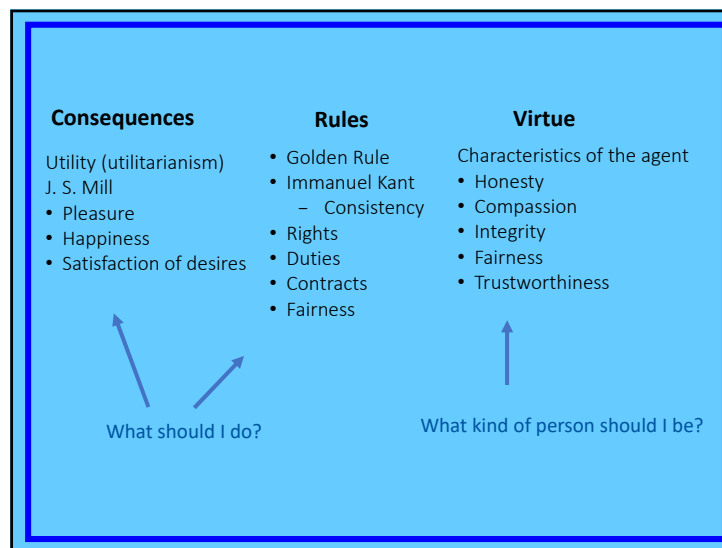
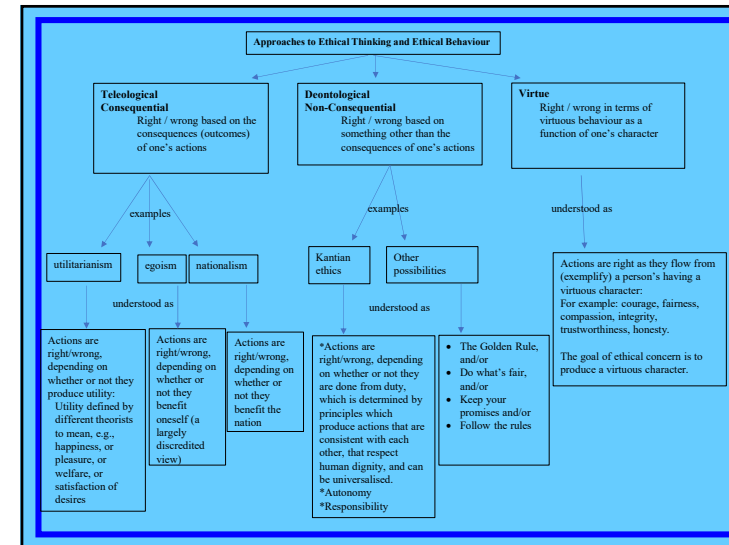
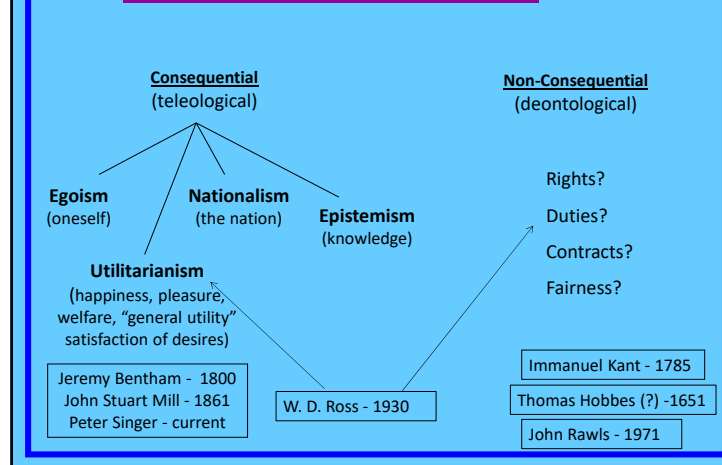
- prudential
- political
- preference
- artistic
- ...
- ...

## Ethics





## Normative Ethical Theories



## Immanuel Kant (1785)

### Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals

The only thing that is good without qualification is a good will – i.e., a will which wills well (does a good job willing). The good lies in the willing, not in the particular thing which was willed.

This has to be the basis of morality. Any other proposed criteria are either inappropriate or inadequate.

"duty" – not "inclination" or "achievement of some particular result" – is the central notion of morality.

This is the only thing which makes sense:

Otherwise, rightness and wrongness are matters of fortuitousness (luck) or simply a person's natural characteristics (like height, weight, and, perhaps, sense of humour), rather than necessary characteristics, and behaviour that we can exercise control over. And that is simply not how we think about morality.

Autonomy is what's important.  
 Autonomous choice.  
 Autonomous decision-making.  
 Autonomous willing.

Willing well is a matter of consistency and universalisability:

The test –

Could what you are willing become a universal law? That is, "what would things be like if everyone did it?"

It's not a matter of whether or not you would *like* it; but whether it could even be possible for there to be such a world.

Here's an example: promise-keeping

promise-keeping is an example of what Kant calls a 'perfect duty': that is, it allows no latitude for inclination. In the case of making a promise, the duty is to keep it, full stop; no exceptions.

The duty to develop one's talents (self-development) is an imperfect duty: it allows leeway, latitude for inclination.

This is somewhat on the order of what I'll mention a bit later as a duty of social responsibility: you have to do something, but it's up to you as to exactly what you do: you can, to this extent, 'do what you like' (i.e., whatever you're inclined to do).

### **promise-keeping**

a logical matter. It's logically impossible to have it any other way.

### **helping someone in need**

not a logical matter (no logical inconsistency in imagining a world in which no one helps anyone else).

BUT, you couldn't will it: an inconsistency in the willing.

### **The categorical imperative – 5 formulations**

First, understand this:

- an imperative: "do this", "do that", "don't do that"
- an imperative that is categorical: allows no exceptions; no "if's", "and's", or "but's"; no allowance for, say, what you'd *like* to do.

And, understand this:

- Kant talks about 'maxims'. A maxim is a general principle. Whenever a person does something, there is a maxim involved:



## Maxims

e.g.,

Wayne asked me to give this lecture and I said 'yes', and here I am.

The 'yes' wasn't just a reflex, or a bit of capriciousness that makes no sense. It might have been, say,

- "Whenever a friend asks me to do something, then if my calendar is clear, I'll do it.", or
- "Whenever someone offers me gobs of money to perform before an audience, I'll do it", or ...

In order to understand my action as rational, you need to understand it as falling under a maxim (a general principle). You understand not merely what I'm doing, but why I'm doing it.

There is just one 'categorical imperative' – and there are five formulations of it, each of which, according to Kant, is derived logically from the ones before it:

### First formulation:

*Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*  
(i.e., as if everyone were required to do it)

### Second formulation:

*Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.*  
(a requirement to respect people's personhood)

- Duty as the basic moral feature

- Good will
  - ✓ Not in terms of effects

- Good will → duty

✓ **Agent autonomy**

✓ **Morality not a matter of luck or accident**

- Avoidance of hypocrisy

- Not character

I want to emphasise the significance of these two features, according to Kant.

Personal responsibility: you willed that it be done, you made it happen – no moral luck, no moral accidents

## Central features of Kant's deontological ethics

- **Duty** – not inclination or achievement of some particular result – is the central notion of morality.
- **Agent autonomy** – the agent decides and then makes themselves do what is required. The agent is responsible for what they do; they make it happen. Morality isn't a matter of character – it's a matter of what one makes happen as a result of willing (willpower).
- **Morality is not a matter of luck or accident**
  - If consequences or character is the determinant of right/wrong, then whether or not your particular action is right or wrong could simply be the result of luck or accident – and we **KNOW** that morality isn't that kind of thing.
- **Some duties are 'perfect'** – allow no leeway for inclination: e.g., promise-keeping.
- **Some duties are 'imperfect'** – allow some leeway for inclination: e.g., duty to develop your talents.



## Hypocrisy

**a “practical” inconsistency between what a person believes about themselves, and how that person actually behaves**

Willing a maxim, and acting according to it.

false promise in the hard case  $\approx$  hypocrisy

maybe you actually believe about yourself that you're acting according to a maxim (a general principle), but you're not, in fact, acting that way.

## John Stuart Mill (1861)

When we engage in any action, we first have some idea of what we're trying to accomplish. A reasonable gauge, then, of rightness and wrongness would seem to be whether the means we've chosen to get there actually do the job.

In the most general sense, what we're out to achieve is happiness. There is no in principle reason why our own happiness is preferable to anyone else's.

Therefore –

“actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.”

Nothing else makes any sense.

“It is not my present purpose to criticize these thinkers [who thought they could deduce moral principles *a priori*]; but I cannot help referring ... to ... the most illustrious of them, ... [Immanuel] Kant. This remarkable man [lays] down an universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation...: ‘So act, that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings.’ But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any ... impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the *consequences* of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.”

John Stuart Mill (1863), *Utilitarianism*, chap. 1, ‘General Remarks’

- Basis of morality  
✓anti-Kant
- consequences are what matters
- Utilitarian principle

## W.D. Ross (1930)

### *Prima facie* duties

1. duties resting on one's own previous acts
  - fidelity – resting on a promise
  - reparation – resting on a previous wrongful act
2. duties resting on others' previous acts
  - gratitude
3. duties resting on the possible inappropriate distribution of pleasure or happiness
4. duties resting on the possibility of our being able to improve people's conditions with respect to virtue or intelligence or pleasure
  - beneficence
5. duties resting on the possibility of our being able to improve our own condition with respect to virtue or intelligence
  - self-improvement
6. duties resting on the recognition that there is a distinction between helping and not harming
  - non-maleficence – more stringent than duty of beneficence

Maybe this is an example of moral pluralism:

There is no one single moral theory or principle that should be accepted as preferable to others. There are different, diverse, and even mutually inconsistent ethical positions that should be recognised; and there is not necessarily any single moral principle or set of principles that everyone should accept.

### Relativism:

Values are different. They are relative to, for example, cultures, times, places, individuals.

- descriptive relativism: a matter of fact – it's what goes on, culture-to-culture
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## Contractarianism

E.g.,

❖ Thomas Hobbes (1651)

without society, there is “*continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short*”

*Leviathan*, Chapter 13

Without society, there is no ethics – just as there is no ethics among animals. Ethics requires that there be a contract among the parties concerned.

Ethical requirements (duties) = terms of the contract

❖ John Rawls (1971) [1921-2002]

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

The ‘original position’ – people are free and equal

What principles would people agree upon? Principles ‘that rational and free persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamentals of their association’ (p.11)

How can we figure out what these principles would be?

Operating from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’: ‘no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like’ (p. 137)

From this position, what principles would people agree on?

1. A ‘principle of equality’:  
‘each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others’ (p. 60)
2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that
  - a. any benefits must benefit the least advantaged class (the ‘difference principle’). (He’s claiming that a ‘minimax’ strategy is the rational strategy.)
  - b. they are attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of ‘fair equality of opportunity’ (p. 302)

### Strategies (from game theory):

- Minimax – minimise your maximum loss  
(Rawls thinks this is *the* rational strategy for accepting a political setup)
- Maximax – maximise your maximum gain
- Maximin – maximise your minimum gain

## Procedural justice

a procedure for doing something can be just or not, depending on –

- Perfect procedural justice – you know what would be a just outcome, and there's a procedure that will guarantee it (e.g., cutting a pie for 8 people)
- Imperfect procedural justice – you know what would be a just outcome, and although there's no procedure to guarantee it, you can get a procedure that gets as close as you can get to it (e.g., criminal justice system)
- Pure procedural justice – the justice of the procedure doesn't depend on its producing any particular outcome. The outcome will be just, if the procedure itself is just (e.g., flipping a coin).

## Virtue Ethics

Human Excellence

Virtuousness – exhibiting the virtues

honesty  
trustworthiness  
courage  
.  
.  
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aretē

Plato  
Aristotle

## Plato (circa 380 BC)

Virtues: those things that enable humans to function well as humans.

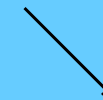
Function of a knife is to cut. A sharp edge allows it to perform this function well. So, a sharp edge is the virtue of a knife.

What are particularly human functions?

virtues are – courage, wisdom, temperance, justice

## Plato

State (large, general)



Individual (small)

- Virtue as internal – not interpersonal
- Good person

## Aristotle (circa 330 BC)

Question: "What's IT all about, anyway?"

Answer: Happiness

What does happiness amount to, and how do we get to it – what are the characteristics we should develop in ourselves so as to arrive at happiness?

Whatever these characteristics are, they are the "human virtues". Consider the types of things that humans do, and where they (we) find happiness; and then consider what is involved in doing them well or badly: these will be the corresponding virtues and vices.

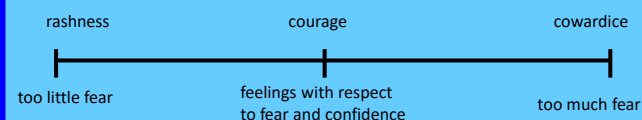
Moral virtues – concerned with "doing things"

Intellectual virtues – concerned with "thinking"

"golden mean" – moderation in all things → **NO**

All virtues are concerned with feelings: the virtue is a mean between feeling too much and feeling too little.

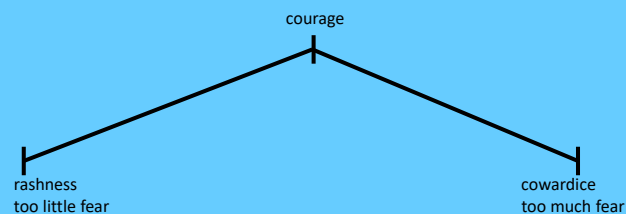
courage is the virtue concerned with the appropriate feelings of fear and confidence. It is mean between feeling too little fear and feeling too much fear:



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courage is a mean between feeling too much and feeling too little.

- it's a mean between feeling too much and feeling too little.
- it's an extreme with respect to what's right



- Happiness – end of the chain of "why?"
- Character
- Degree of precision

"Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of... [I]t is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits. It is . . . equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs."

*Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. I, Chap. 3*

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