

# *Philosophical Ethics*

*debating right and wrong*



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2020

# *A Moral Dilemma*

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## *the runaway trolley*

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- *Would* you throw the switch?
- *Should* you throw the switch?
- **WHY?**

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*If you are faced with a situation in which it looks certain that someone will end up hurt, you should do whatever you can to minimize the number of victims.*

But what about another case like this...

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## *another runaway trolley*

You are standing on a bridge over a railroad track railroad when you notice a runaway trolley coming down the tracks in your direction. There are five children playing on the track below too far away to hear you. There is a rather large person next to you and if you push him in front of the trolley it will stop the trolley but kill him.

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- In this case most people would say that they would *not* push the large person into the tracks, and even that it would be *wrong* do do this.
- Why is this when the results are the same in both cases?

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*Don't directly cause harm to someone even if it seems like the outcome will be good.*

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**Philosophical ethics** attempts to answer questions like these and figure out what ethics is all about.

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- *What moral principles do real people follow and how do we explain these principles?*

- The first branch of philosophical ethics is descriptive ethics which attempts to describe and explain how we really think about moral and ethical issues.
- Scientists also look at ethics from this perspective, for example, when neuroscientists try to determine what parts of the brain are active when we face different versions of dilemmas like the trolley problem.

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*meta-ethics*



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## *meta-ethics*



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- *Is morality really just a matter of opinion, or is it subject to rational assessment and validation?*
- The second branch of philosophical ethics is meta-ethics which looks at ethics and its general features, again without taking a stance on what might really be right or wrong?
- Meta-ethical questions are about the *status* of ethical claims as compared with other ways of thinking and speaking, and are an important part of the philosophical approach since they concern our basic assumptions about ethics.

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- *What moral principles are really justified and what is it that we should actually do in cases like this?*

- The third branch of philosophical ethics is normative or prescriptive ethics which jumps right into debates about right and wrong and takes a position principles and particular cases.
- This approach is unique to philosophy since philosophy is not always just a neutral analysis of ideas, but also involves stating a position and defending it. This is the side of philosophy that is actively engaged with its subject matter and not just looking on from the sidelines.



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5. **Kant's Ethics of Duties:** immoral behavior makes no ultimate sense.
6. **The Ethics of Care:** morality is not about abstract rules, but about real relationships

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Ruth Benedict  
1887-1948



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- Ruth Benedict was an American anthropologist whose encounters with indigenous peoples convinced her that there was no universally valid set of moral principles.
- For her, culture and community, not reason and humanity, dictate moral principles.
- Relativism is a "meta-ethical" claim about the nature of moral thinking and *not* an attempt to justify any particular moral principles.

# *Cultural Relativism*

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Different cultures have different views about right and wrong.

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- This may seem like an obvious argument, but does it follow that there are no principles simply because people may disagree about *what they are*?
- We also disagree about the facts, but it doesn't follow from this that there are no true facts.





# *Subjective Relativism*



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- Ultimately the story of "The Grapes of Wrath" shows characters banding together to overcome this idea that "sin" and "virtue" are nothing but subjective opinions.
- But subjectivism is nevertheless a popular theory.

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Moral claims are always up for debate.

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- This seems like an inevitable conclusion, and yet...

*Find out more*



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