The Moral Maze

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Introduction

Entering the maze

We all grapple with questions of right and wrong. Should I tell the truth even if it hurts someone's feelings? Is it always wrong to take what's not ours? These everyday ethical dilemmas involve making judgments about the moral nature of actions. But what makes a moral claim like "Stealing is wrong" true? Where does the validity of such pronouncements lie?

This question of truth-makers is central to ethical inquiry. In most areas, truth-makers are fairly straightforward. The truth-maker for the statement "The chair is red" is the actual red color of the chair itself. But in the realm of morality, things get much trickier. Unlike physical properties, there's no readily observable entity that makes statements like "Helping others is good" definitively true.

This lack of obvious truth-makers has led philosophers to propose vastly different ethical theories. Each theory offers a distinct answer to the question of what grounds moral truths. Here, our **core intuitions** about right and wrong come into play. These are deeply held beliefs ingrained in our moral compass. Classic examples include: causing harm is bad, fairness is important, and promises should generally be kept. These core intuitions often subconsciously influence our attraction to particular ethical theories.

Think of it this way. If a key intuition for you is that happiness is the ultimate good, you might find theories emphasizing pleasure more compelling than those focused on duty or virtue.

Exploring different ethical theories involves examining their proposed truth-makers for moral claims and how they align with (or challenge) our core intuitions. Some theories, like Divine Command Theory, suggest God's decrees serve as the ultimate truth-makers for morality. Others, like Natural Law Theory, posit the existence of universal moral laws discoverable by

reason. Still others, like Utilitarianism, focus on consequences, with actions judged right or wrong based on their ability to maximize well-being.

As we delve deeper into these diverse perspectives, we'll uncover their strengths and weaknesses, prompting us to critically examine our own moral foundations. Are our core intuitions always reliable guides? Can different theories offer complementary insights? The journey through this rich ethical landscape promises to challenge our assumptions and equip us with a more nuanced understanding of the nature of moral truth.

Truth-Makers

Think of a truth-maker as the reason a statement is true. When we say, "The sky is blue," the truth-maker is a verifiable fact: the way light interacts with Earth's atmosphere. Moral claims, however, operate differently. There's no simple "sky color" equivalent underpinning pronouncements like "Charity is virtuous" or "Lying is wrong."

This philosophical puzzle lies at the heart of ethical inquiry. Different ethical theories propose radically different answers to the question of what makes moral claims true. Here's a glimpse at a few possibilities:

- **Divine Decree:** In Divine Command Theory, the truth-maker for moral claims lies in the will of a higher being. Actions are right or wrong simply because God commands or forbids them.
- **Universal Laws:** Kantian Ethics suggests reason can reveal universal moral laws, like "Never lie." These laws are truth-makers; actions that align with them are right, those that violate them are wrong.
- **Consequences:** Theories like Utilitarianism locate truth-makers in the outcomes of actions. Maximizing happiness, well-being, or the fulfillment of preferences becomes the standard for judging actions as morally correct.

- **Social Agreement:** Relativism proposes that moral truths are determined by cultural norms or individual beliefs. There's no single objective truth-maker, but rather a multitude of potentially valid ones depending on the context.
- **No Truth, Just Feeling:** Emotivism denies the existence of moral truth-makers altogether! It argues statements like "Honesty is good" merely express emotional approval, similar to saying "Hurrah!"

The search for truth-makers brings complexity to our moral thinking. Is morality grounded in something external, like a divine command or rational law? Is it a product of human societies and agreements? Or perhaps, as some skeptics suggest, is there no real moral truth to be found?

In the following chapters, we'll delve into these competing theories. Each one rests on a distinct idea of what, if anything, makes a moral claim true. Analyzing these potential truth-makers provides a powerful lens for understanding and evaluating these diverse ethical frameworks.

Intuitions

Deep within us lie core intuitions – deeply held beliefs about the nature of right and wrong. They form a sort of internal compass, influencing our moral judgments, even when we're not consciously aware of them. Let's examine some common core intuitions:

- **The Importance of Consequences:** Many of us strongly believe that the consequences of an action are crucial in determining its morality. Causing unnecessary harm is generally considered wrong.
- **Fairness Matters:** A sense of fairness and justice is ingrained in our moral thinking. We instinctively recoil at situations where people are treated unequally or suffer undeservedly.

- **Duty and Promises:** Many feel a strong obligation to uphold promises and fulfill duties, even when it is personally inconvenient. Loyalty and respect for commitments are morally potent intuitions.
- **Intentions Count:** We often judge actions differently based on intent. An accidental harm holds less moral weight than one committed with malice.
- **Character as Key:** Some intuitions emphasize the moral importance of developing a virtuous character. Traits like compassion, honesty, and courage are seen as intrinsically good.

Our core intuitions play a powerful role in shaping our attraction to different ethical theories. For instance, if you believe that consequences are the primary measure of morality, you might be drawn to Utilitarianism. If the sanctity of universal duties resonates deeply, you might find Kantian Ethics compelling.

However, our intuitions aren't infallible guides. Sometimes they conflict, like when keeping a promise might lead to negative consequences. Additionally, cultural upbringing and personal experiences significantly shape our core intuitions.

As we explore different ethical theories, it's important to remain aware of our own core intuitions. When does a theory feel intuitively right? At what point does it challenge our deepest moral convictions? This process of self-reflection allows us to better understand the foundations of our own morality. It reveals whether long-held intuitions stand up to rational scrutiny or whether some adjustment might be required to develop a more consistent and defensible personal ethical code.

The Intersection

Our focus on truth-makers and intuitions allows us to adopt a system of analysis for every ethical theory that we'll look at. Before we get to that, it's good to recognize that different philosophers have offered vastly different answers to these fundamental questions. Here's where our exploration gets intriguing:

- Some prioritize the consequences of our actions as the core of moral truth. If an action leads to positive outcomes, it's considered good.
- Others believe in universal moral laws that dictate right and wrong, independent of results. For them, the truth-maker of morality might lie in our ability to follow these universal principles.
- Still others might see moral truth as something created by human agreement or shaped by culture. In this view, truth-makers depend on specific contexts and shared beliefs.
- However, there's also the possibility that our moral intuitions lack objective grounding. Some thinkers challenge the very idea of moral truth-makers.

Examining these different perspectives compels us to reflect on our own core intuitions. What do we value most: consequences, universal duties, the development of character? Do we have faith in the existence of objective moral truths, or are we inclined towards a more subjective view?

Engaging with these questions will not only deepen your understanding of the rich history of ethical thought but also help you become more aware of the personal beliefs shaping your own approach to morality. It's a journey of critical examination and thoughtful re-evaluation of your own assumptions about right, wrong, and where the truth lies.

Theory Assessment

We can now introduce a kind of step-by-step way to assess a moral theory:

Step 1: Identify the Core Claim About Truth-Makers

- **Question:** What, according to the theory, makes moral statements like "helping others is good" true or false?
- **Look For:** The theory's proposed source of moral truth – it might be divine command, universal principles of reason, societal agreements, consequences, or something else entirely.

Step 2: Evaluate the Logic and Consistency

- **Coherence:** Does the proposed truth-maker hold up logically? Is it well-defined and internally consistent?
- **Contradictions:** Does the truth-maker conflict with other widely held beliefs or known facts about the world?

Step 3: Check Against Your Intuitions

- **Gut Check:** Does the theory's proposed truth-maker align with your core intuitions about what makes actions right or wrong?
- **Conflicts:** Are there any situations where the truth-maker would lead to a morally unpalatable conclusion? Does it create conflicts with your strongly held moral beliefs?

Step 4: Consider the Implications

- **Real-World Effects:** What would happen if the theory's truth-maker were widely adopted? Would it lead to a just and compassionate society, or could it potentially justify harmful actions?

- **Scope:** Does the truth-maker offer guidance in complex moral dilemmas, or does it leave too much ambiguity?

Step 5: Weigh the Strengths and Weaknesses

- **No Easy Answers:** Recognize that no theory is perfect. Each has strengths and weaknesses regarding its proposed truth-maker for morality.
- **Refine Judgment:** Evaluate the overall plausibility of the truth-maker considering the logical arguments and your own intuitions.

In order to see how such an assessment can be used, let's focus briefly on the moral theory known as Divine Command Theory. According to Divine Command Theory an action's moral rightness or wrongness depends solely on whether it aligns with God's commands. What is good is determined by what God decrees to be good. Ethical principles are not independent of God but derive their authority and meaning entirely from divine will. Now we assess such theory with our five-step process:

1. **Truth-Maker:** God's commands.
2. **Logic:** Questions of divine existence, authority, and interpretation arise.
3. **Intuitions:** Might clash with our sense of justice if divine commands are arbitrary or cruel.
4. **Implications:** Can lead to rigid rules, lacks flexibility in complex situations.
5. **Assessment:** May be compelling to those with strong religious faith but presents challenges for those favoring secular reasoning or questioning unquestioning obedience.

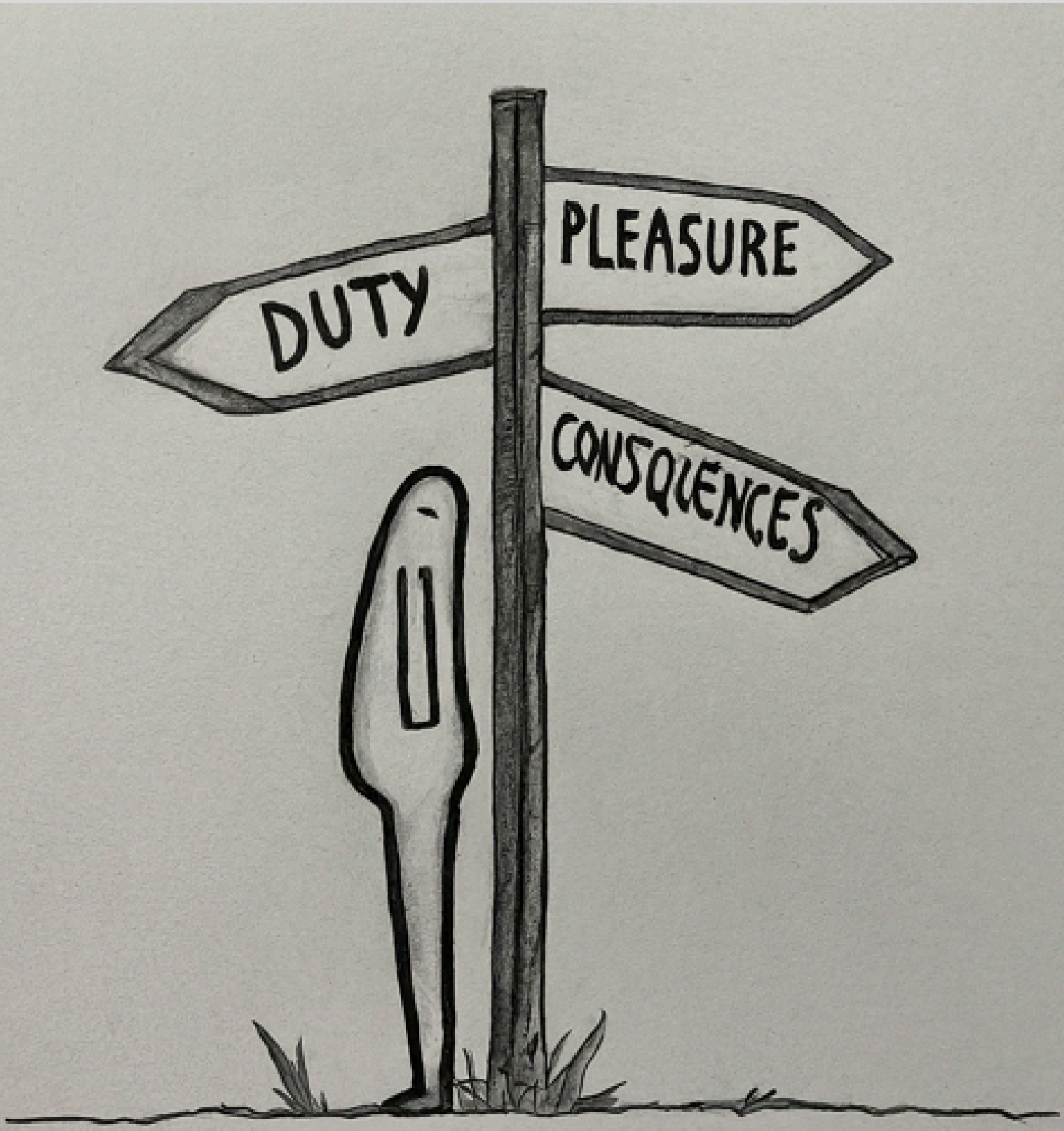
It is likely that you had a slightly different assessment. That's good! Such differences are the basis of insightful and helpful discussion. It is likely that over the semester you will have different - perhaps vastly different - moral beliefs and intuitions from both myself and your fellow students. So long as we remain respectful, such differences should be discussed and debated.

One Caveat

As we embark on this study of ethics, it's important to understand that not everyone believes moral claims can be definitively true or false. Error theorists argue that when we say "Stealing is wrong" or "Honesty is good," we're in a way mistaken – they believe such moral judgments are fundamentally false. Others claim that moral language is simply a matter of expressing individual feelings or social conventions, a position known as non-cognitivism. These theories challenge our basic assumptions about ethical judgments and force us to re-examine what we mean when we engage in moral discourse, and how we think of moral disagreement.

Furthermore, we'll grapple with the unsettling idea of moral luck. Some philosophers argue that a great deal of our moral evaluation hinges on factors beyond our control. Our character, the situations we find ourselves in, and even the outcomes of our actions are shaped by luck — from our upbringing to random chance. This raises concerns about how much genuine moral responsibility we bear and whether our praise and blame of actions are truly justified when luck plays such a significant role.

The Theories



Relativism/Subjectivism: Morality in the Eye of the Beholder

> **Truth-Maker:** Individual feelings or preferences; cultural values and norms.
>
> **Core Intuition:** Morality is not universal, determined by personal opinion or society's standards.

Relativism and Subjectivism are philosophical frameworks that challenge the existence of universal moral truths. They suggest that ethical claims like "stealing is wrong" or "helping others is good" aren't absolutely true or false. Instead, the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the perspective of the individual or the cultural values within which they operate.

At the heart of these theories is the idea of a flexible truth-maker for morality. Relativists often locate truth in the standards or norms held by a specific society, while subjectivists believe it lies within the individual's own beliefs, feelings, or preferences.

The core intuitions driving Relativism/Subjectivism are:

- **Diversity:** Observing the vast differences in moral beliefs across cultures and individuals, these theories highlight the lack of a single, unquestionable moral code.
- **Respect for Difference:** These views promote tolerance by acknowledging that other cultures or individuals might have legitimate reasons for different moral outlooks.
- **Personal Autonomy:** Subjectivism, in particular, emphasizes the individual's right to create their own moral framework, rather than conforming to external standards.

While intuitively appealing, these theories also grapple with complex questions about judging harmful practices across cultures and the possibility of moral progress if values are always shifting.

> **First reading:** **Gilbert Harman - What is Moral Relativism?**
>
> **Second reading:** **Gilbert Harman - Moral Relativism Defended**

Divine Command Theory: Morality from a Higher Authority

Truth-Maker: Religious texts, teachings, or the will of a higher being.

Core Intuition: Morality comes from an external, divine, and unquestionable authority.

Divine Command Theory grounds morality directly in the will and directives of a divine being. This supreme being, often referred to as God, is seen as the ultimate source of moral truth. Actions are considered right or wrong solely based on whether they align with or violate divine commands, as revealed through sacred texts, religious traditions, or spiritual experiences.

This theory rests on several foundational intuitions:

- **Ultimate Authority:** God, as the creator and sustainer of the universe, holds absolute authority over all things, including the realm of morality.
- **Divine Revelation:** Moral knowledge isn't derived from human reason but is revealed by God through faith, religious sources, or direct communication.
- **Unquestionable Morality:** Moral principles, established by God, are not open to debate or human interpretation. Obedience to these commands is the essence of a morally good life.
- **Clarity and Purpose:** Divine Command Theory offers a straightforward moral framework, providing clear guidance on right and wrong actions and a sense of purpose in following these directives.

Critics question whether morality can truly be based on unquestioning obedience, pointing to potential contradictions between different interpretations of divine commands. Additionally, they question whether an action can be considered "good" simply because it is commanded, regardless of any harmful consequences it might have.

First reading: **Blackwell Guide - Chapter 4**

Second reading: **Plato - The Euthyphro Dilemma (pgs 41 - 58)**

Natural Law Theory: Morality Woven into the Universe

Truth-Maker: Observable order in nature; human reason and inherent purpose.

Core Intuition: Morality is rooted in the natural world or discoverable through reason.

Natural Law Theory proposes that morality isn't a human invention but rather an inherent part of the natural order. It claims that through reason and careful observation of the world around us, we can discern universal moral principles that exist independently of human societies or cultural trends. These principles guide right action and promote human flourishing.

Several core intuitions underpin this theory:

- **Rational Order:** The universe isn't chaotic but operates according to a rational, purposeful design. This design includes a moral framework accessible to human understanding.
- **Discoverable Truths:** Moral truths, like the laws of physics, can be discovered through the exercise of reason and observation, not arbitrarily created by individuals or societies.
- **Natural Purpose:** Human nature and the wider world have an inherent purpose or direction. Morality guides us towards fulfilling this natural purpose, promoting what is considered good for human beings.
- **Objective Morality:** Moral principles are not mere preferences or social conventions. They have a universal quality that transcends cultural differences or individual opinions.

Natural Law Theory faces challenges, however. Critics point to the difficulty of defining what is truly "natural" and express concern that some things observable in nature might not be morally good. Additionally, the theory can struggle to provide clear guidance in complex dilemmas where fundamental values seem to conflict.

First reading: **SEP Entry on Natural Law Ethics - Read in Full**

Second reading: **Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Law - Chapter 1**

Virtue Theory: Morality Springs from Character

> **Truth-Maker:** Development of virtuous character traits (honesty, kindness, etc.)
>
> **Core Intuition:** Morality stems from being a good person, focused on inner qualities, not just actions.

Virtue Theory shifts the focus away from specific actions or their consequences and centers morality on the cultivation of good character. It asserts that a truly ethical life comes from developing inner qualities like honesty, compassion, wisdom, and courage. By becoming a virtuous person, one's actions will naturally tend towards what is morally good.

This perspective is rooted in several foundational intuitions:

- **The Primacy of Being:** Virtue Ethics emphasizes the importance of being a certain kind of person rather than simply following external rules or calculating results.
- **Human Potential:** It views humans as striving for eudaimonia – a state of flourishing and fulfillment that arises from living in accordance with virtues.
- **Inner Transformation:** Moral progress isn't about memorizing a list of do's and don'ts but a process of personal growth and cultivating strong character traits.
- **Practical Wisdom:** Rather than rigid rules, Virtue Ethics calls for practical wisdom (phronesis) to navigate complex situations and determine the virtuous course of action.

However, this theory faces questions about its practicality. Critics argue that focusing on character doesn't always provide clear guidance for specific moral choices. Additionally, they question if virtues are universal or might vary across cultures.

> **First reading:** **John Bowin - Aristotle's Virtue Ethics**
>
> **Second reading:** **The Oxford Handbook of Virtue - Chapter 25**

Consequentialism (focus on Hedonism): Morality is About the Results

Truth-Maker: Consequences based on the amount of pleasure or pain generated.

Core Intuition: The right action maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain.

Consequentialism stands in stark contrast to theories that focus on inherent rules or character traits. Instead, it judges the morality of an action solely based on its consequences. The core principle is that the right action is the one that produces the most favorable outcome for everyone involved. Hedonism is a specific type of consequentialism that identifies pleasure as the ultimate good. Actions are deemed morally right if they maximize pleasure and minimize pain. It relies on the following key intuitions:

- **Focus on Outcomes:** The moral worth of actions lies entirely in what they produce, not on the intentions behind them.
- **Pleasure as the Ultimate Good** Pleasure is seen as the only thing intrinsically valuable, with pain being intrinsically bad.
- **Calculating Morality:** Moral decisions become a form of calculation – weighing the possible pleasure and pain resulting from different actions.
- **Focus on the Collective:** Hedonistic consequentialism emphasizes the overall pleasure experienced by everyone impacted by a decision, not just the individual.

Critics of Consequentialism raise significant challenges. They point to the difficulty of accurately predicting consequences and question whether maximizing pleasure should be the ultimate goal. Additionally, they worry that it can justify actions that violate individual rights or intuitive notions of fairness in pursuit of a greater good.

First reading: **Lucretius - Introduction, Section 3**

Second reading: **The Examined Life - Chapter 10**

Utilitarianism: Morality for the Greatest Good

Truth-Maker: Consequences based on general well-being or happiness.

Core Intuition: The right action maximizes overall good and minimizes overall harm.

Utilitarianism stands as a major branch of consequentialist ethics. It centers on the idea that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. Utilitarians generally focus on maximizing overall happiness, well-being, or the satisfaction of preferences.

This theory rests on several foundational intuitions:

- Impartiality: In calculating the "greatest good," everyone's well-being counts equally, regardless of social status, relationship to the decision-maker, or any other factor.
- Consequences Matter: Much like hedonism, Utilitarianism rejects the idea of inherent rightness or wrongness in actions. An action's moral value is entirely dependent on the outcomes it produces.
- Maximizing the Good: The ultimate goal is to create the most good possible, whether defined as happiness, well-being, or the fulfillment of preferences.
- Measurable Morality: Utilitarianism aims to provide a framework for moral calculation, weighing the potential positive and negative consequences of actions for everyone affected.

Critics challenge many aspects of Utilitarianism. They question the difficulty of measuring and comparing well-being, worry about potential sacrifices of minority groups in pursuit of the greater good, and argue that justice and individual rights shouldn't always be secondary to maximizing happiness.

First reading: John Stuart Mill - Utilitarianism (excerpts)

Second reading: Judith Jarvis Thomson - The Trolley Problem

Kantianism (Deontology): Morality through Reason

> **Truth-Maker:** Rationality, universal laws, and duties or obligations.
>
> **Core Intuition:** Morality depends on following absolute rules based on reason, regardless of outcomes.

Kantianism, named after philosopher Immanuel Kant, fundamentally rejects the idea that morality is determined by consequences, feelings, or societal norms. Instead, it asserts that true morality resides in following universal laws that can be discovered through pure reason. An action is only moral if it aligns with these rational laws, regardless of any positive or negative outcome it might produce.

Key intuitions driving Kantian ethics include:

- Reason as Supreme: Human beings possess a unique capacity for reason, setting them apart in the natural world. This reason is the true source of our moral duties.
- The Categorical Imperative: Kant's cornerstone principle, the Categorical Imperative, is a supreme moral law that guides actions. It asks us to act only according to rules we could *will* to become universal laws.
- Respect for Persons: Morality demands that we treat all rational beings, including ourselves, with dignity and respect. We should never treat others merely as a means to an end.
- Duty Above All Else: For Kant, true moral action is motivated only by duty.

Critics of Kantianism question if a purely rational approach can handle the complexities of human relationships and the sometimes unpredictable outcomes of actions. Moreover, they argue that strict adherence to universal laws could sometimes lead to intuitively unjust results.

> **First reading:** **Sally Sedgwick - Introduction**
>
> **Second reading:** **Christine Korsgaard - The Right to Lie**

Ross's Prima Facie Duties: Morality's Multiple Foundations

> **Truth-Maker:** Whichever moral duty has the most weight in a given circumstance.
>
> **Core Intuition:** Contrasting Kant's single categorical imperative, Ross believes in multiple, often competing, moral duties. Morality isn't always about following strict, universally applicable rules.

W.D. Ross's ethical framework challenges the idea that morality can be reduced to a single, supreme principle. Instead, he proposes that there are multiple fundamental moral duties, referred to as "prima facie" duties. These duties provide guidance in different situations.

Key intuitions behind Ross's view include:

- Moral Complexity: Ross acknowledges that real-life situations rarely present simple right vs. wrong choices. Morality is multifaceted, with several legitimate principles often in play.
- Prima Facie Duties: Ross identifies key duties like fidelity (keeping promises), beneficence (doing good), non-maleficence (avoiding harm), justice (fairness), and self-improvement. These are not absolute but provide a moral compass.
- Context and Judgment: The morally right action depends on the specific situation and the need for moral judgment to weigh competing duties.
- Intuition: Ross believes we have an intuitive grasp of these prima facie duties, but refining this moral sense requires experience and reflection.

Critics of Ross find his system potentially vague. They question how we resolve clashes between prima facie duties or if this approach risks justifying any action based on the duty we subjectively prioritize.

> **First reading:** **The Right and the Good - pages 16 - 34**
>
> **Second reading:** **Routledge Handbook to Metaethics - Chapter 30**

Table 1

Theory	Truth-Maker	Core Intuition
Relativism/Subjectivism	Individual feelings or preferences; cultural values and norms	Morality is not universal, determined by personal opinion or society's standards.
Divine Command Theory	Religious texts, teachings, or the will of a higher being.	Morality comes from an external, divine, and unquestionable authority.
Natural Law Theory	Observable order in nature; human reason and inherent purpose.	Morality is rooted in the natural world or discoverable through reason.
Virtue Ethics	Development of virtuous character traits (honesty, kindness, etc.)	Morality stems from being a good person, focused on inner qualities, not just actions.
Consequentialism (focus on Hedonism)	Consequences based on the amount of pleasure or pain generated.	The right action maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain.
Utilitarianism	Consequences based on general well-being or happiness.	The right action maximizes overall good and minimizes overall harm.
Deontology (Kant & Ross)	Rationality, duties or obligations.	Morality depends on duty.

The Skeptics

Mackie's Error Theory: The Illusion of Objectivity

J.L. Mackie's Error Theory presents a radical challenge to traditional notions of morality. It asserts that all of our moral judgments, like "Helping the poor is good" or "Lying is wrong," are fundamentally false. Mackie argues there are no objective moral values or properties in the world for our moral claims to latch onto.

This startling theory rests on several key intuitions:

- Queerness: Mackie finds the idea of objective moral values "queer" or strange. If such values existed, they would be unlike anything else we encounter in the world, lacking the usual ways we verify and understand properties.
- The Argument from Relativity: The vast differences in moral codes across cultures and throughout history suggest that there is no universal moral truth. Instead, Mackie proposes that morality is a human invention shaped by social factors and individual beliefs.
- Science vs. Values: Mackie believes that modern science has shown us a world devoid of inherent moral properties. While science effectively describes the facts of the world, our moral judgments attempt, and ultimately fail, to impose 'oughts' onto an indifferent universe.
- Morality as a Useful Illusion: Despite denying the truth of moral claims, Mackie acknowledges that moral language and behavior play a practical role in human societies, functioning as a tool for regulating behavior and promoting cooperation.

Critics of Error Theory find Mackie's conclusions deeply counterintuitive and worry about the potential consequences of widespread belief in moral nihilism. They argue that even if universally 'proving' objective morality is difficult, it doesn't automatically mean it doesn't exist.

Reading: **Inventing Right and Wrong - Chapter 1**

Ayer's Emotivism: Morality is All About the Feels

A.J. Ayer's Emotivism challenges the traditional idea that moral statements convey truths about the world. Instead, it argues that when we make moral pronouncements like "Charity is good" or "Stealing is wrong," we're simply expressing our emotional approval or disapproval. Moral language functions like saying "Boo!" or "Hurrah!"

Ayer's theory rests on these core intuitions:

- No Moral Facts: Ayer sees moral statements as fundamentally different from statements of fact. There are no moral properties in the world that our ethical judgments can accurately describe.
- Emotive Meaning: Moral words serve to express emotions and attitudes, not to state truths. Saying "murder is wrong" is more akin to yelling in disgust than reporting on a verifiable fact.
- Persuasion, Not Proof: Moral discourse isn't about logical arguments and evidence. When engaging in ethical debates, we are primarily aiming to influence someone's feelings or attitudes.
- Subjectivity of Values: Since moral judgments express personal feelings, there's no ultimate right or wrong in Ayer's view. Ethical disagreements stem from fundamental differences in our emotive responses.

Critics of Ayer find his theory overly simplistic. They argue that it dismisses the reasoned nature of many ethical discussions and struggles to account for how we distinguish between mere expressions of distaste and genuine moral claims. Additionally, they worry that Emotivism undermines the importance of moral principles.

Reading: **Language, Truth, and Logic - Chapter 6**

Williams on Moral Luck: When Praise and Blame Get Complicated

Bernard Williams challenges the deeply ingrained assumption that moral worth and responsibility hinge solely on factors within our control. His concept of moral luck highlights how circumstances beyond our control, from our upbringing to random chance, can significantly influence our moral outcomes, making simple praise or blame problematic.

Williams' views are driven by the following intuitions:

- Luck's Influence on Character: Our characters, the very core of our moral selves, are shaped by factors outside our control – genetics, environment, early experiences. This luck calls into question how responsible we truly are for who we become.
- Results Matter (Unfortunately): Williams acknowledges that results and outcomes often play a large role in our moral judgments. We may judge someone harshly for a harmful action, even if it was largely due to bad luck or circumstances beyond their control.
- The Problem of Integrity: Williams explores the idea that focusing too strongly on internal motivations can create impossible moral dilemmas. If moral worth is only about intentions, it might demand that we abandon personal projects or relationships for the sake of some abstract duty.
- Limits of Control: The world is filled with factors outside our control. Williams argues that our moral philosophy needs to acknowledge this reality and adjust our ideas of praise, blame, and responsibility accordingly.

Critics of Williams worry that his emphasis on moral luck could erode our sense of personal responsibility and lead to a morally lax attitude. However, Williams doesn't aim to absolve us of all responsibility, but rather to make our moral judgments more nuanced and context-sensitive.

Reading: **Moral Luck - Chapter 2**

Nagel on Moral Luck: The Problem of Control

Thomas Nagel, like Williams, explores the unsettling idea that luck plays a significant role in our moral lives. He contends that our moral assessments are often influenced by factors entirely outside our control, from where we're born to the natural talents we possess, raising questions about how much true credit or blame we deserve.

Nagel's analysis rests on these core intuitions:

- Four Types of Luck: Nagel identifies different ways luck intersects with morality: 1) luck in the circumstances of an action, 2) luck in how our actions turn out, 3) luck in our innate dispositions and character (constitutive luck), and 4) luck in how the world fundamentally operates (causal luck).
- The Limits of Control: Nagel argues that if morality rests on things wholly within our control, then it applies to a very narrow scope of our lives. So much of who we are and the outcomes of our actions are shaped by luck.
- The View from Nowhere: Nagel advocates for a more objective moral standpoint, one that attempts to factor out the arbitrary aspects of our individual circumstances and perspectives. However, he acknowledges the difficulty of ever fully achieving such a view.
- Fairness and Responsibility: Our intuitive notions of fairness are shaken by the realization of how much lies beyond our control. Nagel grapples with whether, and how, we can maintain a meaningful sense of moral responsibility while acknowledging the power of luck.

There are a variety of responses to the problem of moral luck as raised by Williams and Nagel. If you would like to discuss some of them in class, I'm sure we can slot it in.

Reading: Mortal Questions - Chapter 3

Table 2

Skeptic	Variety of Skepticism	Truth-Maker Critique	Core Intuition
J.L. Mackie	Error Theory	Objective moral values and facts do not exist.	Morality is a human invention, ultimately without true grounding.
A.J. Ayer	Emotivism	Moral statements are only expressions of feeling.	Moral judgments simply express emotions, not factual statements about the world.
Bernard Williams	Moral Luck	Outcomes beyond our control influence moral judgment.	Moral praise and blame are unjustified when shaped by factors we cannot control.
Thomas Nagel	Moral Luck	We cannot see the world from an absolute viewpoint.	Our moral judgments are always limited by our perspective and circumstances.