# What's the Deal with Moral Philosophers?

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**Eleanor:** I'm Eleanor Price.

**Christiane:** I'm Christiane Wisehart.

**Eleanor:** And this is Examining Ethics brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University

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Christiane: On today's show, we're stepping a little outside of what we normally cover. Instead of talking about ethics, we're gonna talk about the field of ethics and the culture of the philosophers who study ethics. Specifically, we'll be talking about the parts of the moral philosophy world that confuse us, and maybe you listeners.

**Eleanor:** First, we hear some on the street reporting from our old friend and independent producer, Sandra Burtin. Then we'll talk to our own resident ethics expert, Andy Cullison, and another ethicist. Emily McWilliams. They answer some of our most pressing questions about the world and culture of moral philosophy.

**Christiane:** Why are you so rude at dinner parties?

**Andy Cullison**
<laugh> just clarifying. This is for all ethicists generally, not…

**Eleanor:** Stay tuned for all of this on today's episode of examining ethics.

**{music fades}**

**Eleanor:** So Christiane, not sure if you are aware, but we work at the Prindle Institute for Ethics.

**Christiane:** We do don't we, um, we also make this here podcast, which is about ethics,

**Eleanor:** That it is. Our job means that we interact with a lot of moral philosophers and ethicists.

**Christiane:** We do. Um, and because neither of us studied philosophy or ethics, sometimes the world of moral philosophy, as lovable as it is, can be a bit alien to us. So this episode is a big dive into the culture and quirks of the moral philosophy universe. In our first segment, independent producer, Sandra Bertin did a little investigating for us. She roamed the streets of New York city, trying to figure out what we've always wondered. If anyone understands moral

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philosophy jargon besides moral philosophers.

**{music}**

**Sandra Bertin** This is Sandra Bertin and I am on Wall Street right now. It's a bustling Tuesday afternoon. And I'm about to ask people at random if they know moral philosophy jargon. So let's see if anyone will talk to me. Okay. The first one is moral relativism. What does it mean?

**Person on the street 1:** It's like everything. Isn't wait, is it everything isn't good or bad? It's all like on a gradation or is it everything is good and bad. And it's all comparative. {arrrrgggh}

**{game show buzzer sound to indicate wrong answer}**

**Person on the street 2:** People thinking that their culture is more relative than someone else's culture.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 3:** I have no idea.

**Sandra Bertin:** Wanna guess?

**Person on the street 3:** No.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 4:** I don't know…transparency?

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 5:** Moral relativism is the idea that all morals are relative to you and your experiences.

**{right answer ding}**

**Sandra Bertin:** Nailed it. Good job. Okay. Next one. Nonmaleficence.

**Person on the street 6:** Is it like not being centered in oneself?

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 5:** Is it that has to do with your, I feel like it has to do with perception and perception performing that I'm not sure.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 7:** Uh, not sure, but it reminds me of, uh, that the evil witch in sleeping beauty…

**Person on the street 8:** I'm assuming maleficence is something bad and it's not doing something bad.

**{right answer ding}**

**Sandra Bertin:** Yes. Not hurting others. Exactly. Good job. What about…

**Person on the street 8:** <laugh> all my friends giving me the thumbs up.

**Sandra Bertin:** <laugh> okay. Next one. Um, the naturalistic fallacy.

**Person on the street 8:** Naturalistic fallacy. So fallacy is like a flaw in someone's argument. I'm assuming that I, I don't really know what it means by naturalistic. I'm assuming it has to do with like, just the way something is like it's state of being, I don't know.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 9:** Oh God. Uh <laugh>. I mean, fallacy, well, probably derives some word phallic, which as we all know is penis.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 10:** It's the fallacy of using the natural qualities of something as being, uh, like a benefit or making the argument more truthful.

**Sandra Bertin:** Yes, you are so close. It's when, um, you assume two things that are usually conflated together are actually equal, but they're not. So like assuming something, defining something as good as pleasurable is actually incorrect as they're not equal because it just so happens that a lot of good things are pleasurable. Does that make sense?

**Person on the street 10:** Yeah, it does. That's interesting.

**Sandra Bertin:** All right. Cool. Great job guys.

**Person on the street 11:** These guys aren't regular people though.

**Sandra Bertin:** Who are these people?

**Person on the street 10:** We spend a lot of time talking about moral relativism specifically.

**Sandra Bertin:** <laugh> and then the last one contract area and ethics.

**Person on the street 11:** Never no tap out. <laugh> no, I'm done. I'm just a freshman.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 12:** So when you're in an agreement and then you, you are contracted to act in a certain ethical manner.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 13:** I feel like it's like fine print and contracts.

**{wrong answer buzzer}**

**Person on the street 14:** So ethics designed by a person or a group, and then people agree to follow the contract?

**{right answer ding}**

**Sandra Bertin:** Yes. It can also be used as like a hypothetical thing. So like, we can pretend that we've all entered a contract together and we will treat each other as if we have oh, okay. But you got it. You got it. Really good job. Thank you so much for stopping, bye!

**{music fades}**

**Christiane:** So I just wanna say for the record, I would have answered exactly zero of those questions correctly. <laugh>

**Eleanor:** Honestly, I still have a lot of questions about the naturalistic fallacy still, right? Like what is going on with that? <laugh> but it isn't just the jargon that can be confusing to outsiders or us or anybody, even after you've gotten to know a philosopher or two,, there can still be parts of the moral philosophy culture that just don't make a lot of sense.

**Christiane:** Yeah. So I decided to sit down with two of my favorite ethicists, Emily McWilliams and Andy Cullison and get to the bottom of some questions I've always had about philosophy culture.

**Christiane in interview:** All right. First question. Why do you use Latinate language, for example, prima facie, a priori, et cetera.

**Andy Cullison:** Who does that? <laugh>

**Emily McWilliams:** I think I do it in papers because I'm lazy and don't wanna have to think of another way to say the same thing, but I try not to do it in class because it does feel like it, um, obscures understanding and that you then have to pause and explain what the language means. And then go back to explaining the point you were originally making, and that makes it less likely that people will understand the original point that you were making. Um, but I do do it in papers.

**Andy Cullison:** Uh, I can't help, but think the prima facie might have been directed at me.

**Christiane:** <laugh> I don't know…

**Andy Cullison:** <laugh> and I think a lot of these Latinate kinds of phrases that philosophers use are just kind of hangovers from some time, way back when somebody well known, built it into their view. And so whenever you discuss their view, you're sort of stuck using the Latinate phrases they use, and then it just becomes a really bad habit. You use it to write about it. You, you start talking about it and then it just becomes kind of habitual. I'm with Emily on trying not to use them. I think it's actually bad to be using them.

**Christiane:** Why are you so rude at dinner parties? <laugh>

**Andy Cullison:** Just clarifying. This is for all, ethicists generally, not us in particular?

**Christiane:** Well, no. Yeah, not, not neither of you are guilty of this behavior, but, um, because I work at the Prindle Institute for Ethics, you know, I'm around ethicists and philosophers a lot, and I've been at so many dinners where I will, I will be in what I believe is deep in conversation with someone who will then as soon as another philosopher comes to the table, stop the conversation full stop, and just start talking to the other philosopher, um, in, in such a way that they physically sort of turn themselves away from me and our conversation and to a new conversation. And this has happened enough times. Mm-hmm <affirmative> that I think it might be, um, if not all philosophers, at least a, a problem in this community.

**Andy Cullison:** Mm-hmm <affirmative>, that's a good question.

**Emily McWilliams:** That's fair.

**Andy Cullison:** I'd be curious to know if it happens with philosophers in terms of where they are in their career. So let me just give you an example. One of the things I noticed when I left grad school is I suddenly had no one to talk to because you go to grad school and you pick a grad school based on an area of interest. So Rochester, it was epistemology. So you were surrounded by like 15 people who were all like interested in what you're interested in. And then the weird thing is when you get hired away and you're an early career philosopher outside of it,

um, you get hired as an epistemologist because they don't have anybody who does epistemology. So suddenly you go from this environment where on any given day, you can walk into the grad student lounge and there's like five people to talk to, um, to like never having anyone like that. And then you go to a thing like where suddenly you've got four people who are like at your stage, your career, they're doing all this stuff. It's like you're in grad school again. I'd be curious to know if it's more common when philosophers are in that early career stage, just outta grad school. I'd be curious to know if like grad student philosophers would be as bad at this.

**Emily McWilliams:** I would think grad students would be just as bad, but for different reasons. Um, because they're self-conscious and wanna prove that they have something philosophically interesting to say, I would think they would be just as bad. It seems like it's just a, like a failure to make relevant distinctions, which is ironic. But the case you described sounds like a failure to understand what the function of a dinner party is. <laugh> I can see the reason that you might fail to make that distinction because, um, I finished grad school in the spring of 2016. And so I am relearning how to, um, engage with other philosophers when there aren't people who are formally responsible for taking care of me. A lot of it comes from going to conferences and talking to other people about the papers that I'm presenting there and there, when you have the social functions, I think it's part of the function of those events that you're using them to talk to other philosophers about your work. And so philosophers might be trained to think that whenever you see, or at least young philosophers might be trained to think that whenever you see another philosopher at dinner, this is your time to engage them about your work. Um, but I think that's just a failure to make the distinction between different contexts and that we should quit it. Um, that sounds terrible. <laugh> I'm sorry that happened to you. <laugh> multiple times no less,

**Andy Cullison:** There's something peculiar about doing philosophy as an occupation. It is this weird sort of thing that you do it because you absolutely love it. And it's very much like a part of your life and like who you are. And it's not like you're making widgets or something where it's like, I have a work life and I have a personal life mm-hmm <affirmative>. And so at a dinner party, they don't think of talking philosophy the way a business person would think of it as like talking shop. And so, um, it just doesn't seem like, like, this is just what I do. I talk philosophy with people and anybody who wants to talk to me. And so they just, I think that might also be part of it is me. Yeah, we haven't, we haven't learned that that's basically talking shop and when you're around people who have different occupations, there's this kind of social norm of like talking about things other than whatever your work happens to be.

**Emily McWilliams:** I always hated in grad school when, um, I would bring a non philosopher friend around to interact with my philosophy friends and people wouldn't be able to stop talking shop and leaving them out. <laugh> I always resented that.

**Christiane:** Okay. So, um, to me like a classic, uh, philosopher ethicist thing to do is to use like really out there, examples in your arguments. Um, and the one, the most famous one for

ethicists is something called the trolley case. So the first thing I want you to do is explain what the trolley case is. And then I wanna know like why ethicists use examples like this,

**Andy Cullison:** The most basic trolley case, um, a trolley is going down a track. It's headed toward five people who are tied to the track. They can't get away. You're too far away to save them, but you have the option of flipping a switch to divert the trolley to another track. But you realize when faced with this decision, that there's a single person tied to that track. Um, and so you're faced with this decision, this dilemma, do I, do I just let the trolley go down and kill these five people? Or do I actively flip the switch and make it kill one to save the five? And so that's the, that's the first part of it. Um, and most people have the intuition that you should flip the switch and kill the one to save the five. But when you say that, then it introduces these other kinds of puzzles and it's used to sort of generate a kind of puzzle in your moral intuitions.

So here's one way in which it's used. Um, okay. So you say you should flip the switch. Um, what if you had the opportunity of painlessly killing someone without warning and harvesting their organs to save five people? Right? It seems like you're faced with the same kind of decision: kill one to save many. Yet, most people have a strong, visceral reaction against that. They think it's morally atrocious to use someone in that way, harvest their organs. And now you have a genuine philosophical puzzle. Why is it okay to flip the switch in the first case, which most people seem to think, but not okay to kill the person and harvest their organs in the second case,

**Christiane:** That example is weird. It's a weird situation to think about. It's hopefully unrealistic. <laugh> um, what's, what's the purpose of, of an example that's kind of out of this world or unrealistic <laugh> like, what, what work does that do for ethicists?

**Andy Cullison:** The trolley case strikes me as one of the least weird of the examples we could go with. Um, one of the reasons to go with a case like that is when thinking about moral problems and trying to figure out what morality is like. It is kind of nice to get away from examples that you might relate to because there's this thought that your judgment might be clouded. You might already have an opinion about examples that are more familiar. So like you don't want to talk directly about things like abortion or drone strikes or things that people are really heated and passionate about. Mm-hmm <affirmative> you wanna just sort of say like, okay, like get away from anything that you might have encountered. What do you think morally about this case over here? And so trying to go with a case that people haven't encountered, uh, trying to go with a case where it doesn't seem like they might have a stake in the outcome of the debate is I think helpful to try and really zero in on genuine intuitions about the nature of right and wrong.

Take the example that I gave. If I had asked you, is it okay to kill someone and harvest their organs? Uh, you have this strong visceral reaction, like, oh my gosh, that's just horrible. Right? Mm-hmm <affirmative>. So if I had tried to zero in on your intuitions about the nature of right and wrong by starting with that example, you might think, oh, you can never really kill one to

save many. But if I start with, what about this weird case where like, people are just tied to tracks, it's designed to highlight that there might be a conflict in your moral intuitions, that there's, there's an inconsistency in your moral intuitions. That's how, that's how you generate the philosophical puzzle and say, Hey, there's something we really need to think about here, cuz something's gotta give.

**Emily McWilliams:** Um, I think with any case that you're designing in order to try and get people to have a particular moral intuition, um, in order to make some larger point about morality, um, you want to isolate one particular factor that that intuition is responding to. And so if you go with a real world case, like the, um, harvesting one to save the five in the evil doctor example, there might be a number of things that you're reacting to. And this is related to what Andy said. So, um, you know, it might be that we naturally think of that as murder and murder as this morally latent term, but in the trolley case, um, you're trying to see whether it's the fact that you're causing this one person to die that is what's driving the intuition. And so you're able to cook up this kind of abstract unrealistic case in order to isolate that one factor. And sometimes that can be a useful thing to do, um, because we don't merely wanna know what intuition people have, but we also wanna know what that intuition is responding to or what's driving it. Um, and usually use that to make some larger point.

**Christiane:** Okay. Um, so next question. Why are there so many men in philosophy?

**Andy Cullison:** You know, there's a really good, I mean, that's a really good sociological question. A lot of the standard answers that I would think of don't actually fit life as a philosophy professor is, uh, much easier if you're not the one responsible for child rearing, for example. And so if you take sort of traditional patriarchal structures that put that burden more on women, but that was my first thought, but that doesn't explain it because if that were true, then other fields would be just as male dominated, right? So there's something peculiar about philosophy. And it can't just be explained by sort of traditional, um, reasons why a field might be male dominated mm-hmm <affirmative> uh, and I can hazard some guesses. One reason, uh, might be that if you look at the history of philosophy, there's this pretty awful misogynistic tradition of, you know, male philosophers, very openly being like that, philosophy's just not something that women can do. There's like a long tradition in the history, particularly of Western European philosophy, of that kind of attitude. So, um, you very early on get a field that only men are doing, right. At least women are doing it too, but only the men's work is getting talked about, right? So they, so it's men's work that gets to be part of the canon, so to speak um, that could have something to do with it, but I mean it, but that can't be it either because that, like, that was true of say like English, like the first secondary discussions of English literature, I'm sure those were probably pretty male dominated.

**Emily McWilliams:** It seems like it's not just the canon, but it's the idea of, um, what it takes to be a philosopher or what you need to be a philosopher. I mean, I, I think the, the reason some of the, those philosophers throughout history have thought that women couldn't be philosophers is because they thought women lacked the rational capacities to do philosophies. So lacked the

capacities that are like partly constitutive of what it means to do philosophy. Um, I, as a young grad student had, uh, male colleagues, other grad students, not faculty, but other grad students say these things to me pretty explicitly. Um, what, yeah, I once had a friend of mine and he was further along in grad school than me say that, tell me that before he met me, he never thought that he could be friends in the genuine sort of full blown sense with a woman because he never thought that women could be as rational as men could. And he wanted a genuine philosophical friendship. So that I was the first example of a woman who was fully rational in the sense that men are.

**Christiane:** Oh my god. I'm sorry. That sucks. <laugh>

**Emily McWilliams:** I mean, it does, it does suck. And if I, if I experience that, I can imagine what people one or two generations before me experienced. I think it must have been much worse and much more <affirmative>.

**Andy Cullison:** Um, and if someone is willing to just openly say that and not realize that there's something problematic. I mean, imagine how many people are probably thinking that, but right. Just not saying it, right?

**Emily McWilliams:** Or if not endorsing the thought that it's operative on them in some way.

**Andy Cullison:** Or that it's an implicit bias or some kind mm-hmm <affirmative> right. So maybe that maybe there maybe there's some significant implicit bias and explicit bias that makes people, you know, tend to not hire, tend to not focus on, you know, working with students.

**Emily McWilliams:** Yeah. I think there's been a, I mean, there's been a lot of, sort of more recent empirical work aimed at figuring out what it is that keeps women out of philosophy. And I think we just don't because we're pretty early on in committing serious resources to doing that empirical work. We just don't have real answers yet. Um, but luckily there's more resources being devoted to figuring it out.

**Christiane:** I saved my hardest question for last and this is specific to ethics, which is why aren't ethicists any more moral than anyone else? <laugh>

**Emily McWilliams:** That's a great question. That's an excellent question. There was, I remember seeing on a, a blog about a decade ago, a philosophy blog that, um, it, it had been shown empirically that more ethics books went missing from the library than other general philosophy books. <laugh> um, it's an example, I don't have an explanation. <laugh>

**Andy Cullison:** People often talk about, you know, the Prindle Institute, what are you up to? And I say, well, we're in the business of ethics, education, dialogue, and research. And they're like, so can you like, do you really think you can make somebody be moral? Is that what you're doing? Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, you're teaching people to be good people? And I say, well, I,

you know, the thing is ethics education is only a piece of that. I can't, I can't make someone be moral. Um, they have to care about being good. And so if they care about doing good, I can help them get better at reasoning through and trying to figure out what the good thing to do would be. And so now apply that to ethicists. Well what ethicists are trained to do is they're trained to reason through these problems in a really sophisticated, clear, and precise way. At least most of them are. And, um, but, but that alone wouldn't guarantee that an ethicist is gonna do the right thing. If, deep down, the ethicist has, um, you know, not a strong desire, uh, to do good studying ethics doesn't necessarily give you one important piece to, to doing, doing the good thing.

**Emily McWilliams:** Here's a possible hypothesis. Um, I don't even know if it's a hypothesis, but here's one thing you might think, which is that people choose to study a subfield because it's sort of mysterious to them or because they don't understand it intuitively. So for the same reason that someone who finds ethics mysterious might choose to study it, someone who's bad at practical reasoning might work on practical reasoning within philosophy. And so the advantage that that might give you is that you're able to study it from, I don't know, a more "objective perspective" as an anthropologist would or from the outside. And you might think that, well, at least there's an argument to be made that that might make you better at doing the philosophy itself better at figuring out what it is that morality consists in. If it's not intuitive to you from the get go. I'm not sure whether there's any empirical research to back that up, but it's one thing that might explain it.

**Andy Cullison:** There's another hypothesis that I've heard people throw around when it comes to ethicists, which is that ethicists, because they study ethics and because they pay attention to all the morally relevant features, are gonna be really, really good at rationalizing their behavior. Because they will always be able to zero in on something. And if they latch onto it and, you know, sort of self deceive themselves into thinking that in this case, that's the weightiest consideration, they could end up justifying a lot of, uh, behavior.

**Emily McWilliams:** Yeah. We have the skills to be really good motivated reasoners and we have the same motivations as everyone else and that's a fatal combination. <laugh>

**Christiane:** Do you guys have any rude questions for me since I've been so mean and rude to you guys?

**Andy Cullison:** Why do you hate philosophers?

**Christiane:** …Putting you on the spot?

**{music}**

**Eleanor:** Honestly, I found that conversation super illuminating.

**Christiane:** Yeah. It was really helpful for me to hear some of those answers and I think it gave me a lot more empathy for all those moral philosophy weirdos.

**Eleanor:** <laugh> I need that <laugh> listeners, do you have any questions about the world of ethics or moral philosophy that you've always wanted answers to? If you do, we might actually do another round of these kinds of questions for an upcoming episode.

**Christiane:** If you have questions, just shoot us an email at examiningethics@gmail.com and let us know.

**Eleanor:** Also if you're a high school student who is really into ethics or, you know, a high school student, who's really into ethics, we wanted to let you know that the parental Institute is now offering ethics scholarships here at DePaul university.

**Christiane:** Yeah, it's super exciting. So if you wanna know more information about our scholarships, just again, shoot us an email at examiningethics@gmail.com. You can also find links to information about those ethics scholarships on our webpage. That's examiningethics.org. Please be sure to rate us on apple podcasts. It helps us get new listeners and it's still the best way to get our show out there.

**Eleanor:** And we love hearing what you have to say!

**Christiane:** We do.

**Eleanor:** We'll have links to all of the topics we mentioned in our show notes page for this episode at examiningethics.org

**Christiane:** For updates about the podcast, interesting links and more follow us on Twitter at Examining Ethics. We're also on Instagram at Examining Ethics podcast and Facebook.

**Eleanor:** The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute for Ethics.

**Christiane:** Examining Ethics is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University Eleanor Price and Christiane Wisehart produced the show with editorial assistance from Sandra Bertin, Sandra Bertin also conceived, wrote and produced our first segment special thanks to our guest. Emily McWilliams. Our logo is created by Evelyn Brosius. Our music is by Blue Dot Sessions and Podington Bear, and can be found online at freemusicarchive.org. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Thank you for your support.

**{music fades}**

**Christiane:** Okay. Why are there so many beards in philosophy <laugh> and ethics? <laugh>

**Emily McWilliams:** I don't have one <laugh> so I can't answer this question.

**Andy Cullison:** It's Plato's fault. <laugh> <laugh>.