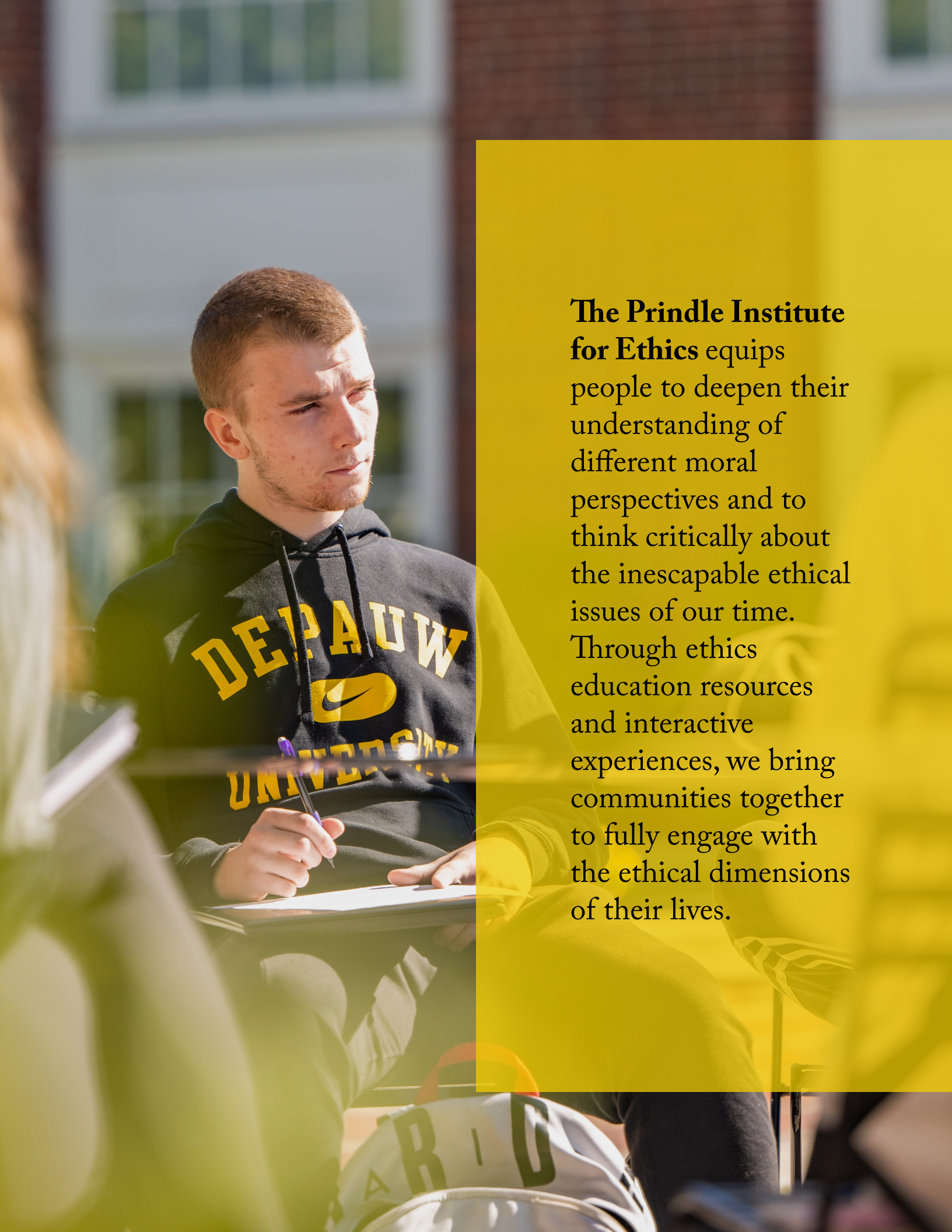
JUNE 4-6, 2025

High School Educator Retreat

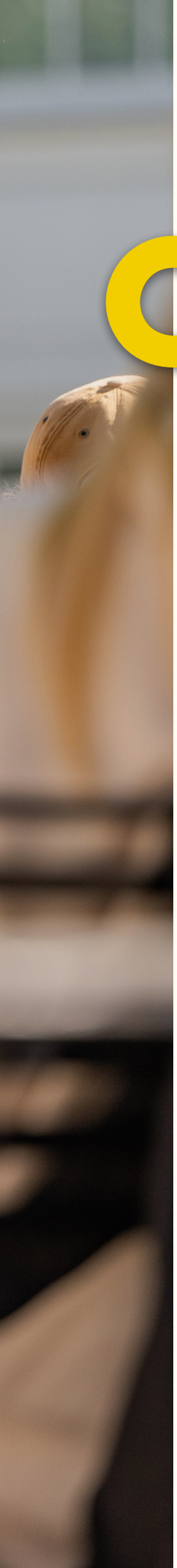
2025 PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

THE PRINDLE INSTITUTE *for Ethics*

DEPAUW



The Prindle Institute for Ethics equips people to deepen their understanding of different moral perspectives and to think critically about the inescapable ethical issues of our time. Through ethics education resources and interactive experiences, we bring communities together to fully engage with the ethical dimensions of their lives.



CONTENTS

Jeffrey Dunn, Ph.D.

PHYLLIS NICHOLAS DIRECTOR

From the Director

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University for what I hope is a restorative and enriching experience.

Our mission at the Prindle Institute is to equip people to deepen their understanding of different moral perspectives so that they can think critically about the ethical issues of our time. For over15 years we have pursued this mission both on our own campus at DePauw, and also in the community by providing resources, activities, and events for K-12 students and educators.

We have run a version of the High School Educator Retreat since the summer of 2023 and each iteration has been inspiring and productive. We are excited to welcome you, our 2025 cohort, and hope that you make new connections with other educators, get new ideas for your classroom, and help us all think together how we can provide meaningful ethics education for high school students.

We look forward to meeting you, to working with you, and to learning from each other.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Dunn, Ph.D.
Phyllis Nicholas Director
The Prindle Institute for Ethics

About the Educator Retreat

The Prindle Institute's High School Educator Retreat is a three-day professional development experience designed to help teachers integrate ethics and dialogue into everyday classroom practice. Held each summer on DePauw University's campus in the heart of a 500-acre nature park, the retreat brings together a small cohort of high school educators from across the country for immersive, collaborative learning.

Rooted in the belief that ethical reasoning belongs in every subject area, the retreat introduces teachers to case-based pedagogy, moral philosophy frameworks, and techniques for facilitating rich classroom discussions—even over difficult or controversial topics. Sessions are interactive and practical, focused on real-world application and purpose-built lesson planning.

Participants also have ample time for informal conversation, nature walks, and rest. The retreat is intentionally designed to feel both intellectually energizing and personally restorative. From structured workshops to spontaneous campfire conversations, the retreat creates space for teachers to reflect on their own commitments—and leave better equipped to guide students in doing the same. The 2025 iteration of the retreat is designed and organized by Alex Richardson, Associate Director for Content Strategy and Engagement at the Institute.

Retreat Itinerary

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4

TIME (ET)	EVENT	LOCATION
8:15AM	**Check-In; Breakfast**	Lobby; Great Room
9:00AM	**Welcome; Introduction; Civic Self-Portrait**	Prindle Auditorium
9:30AM	**Ethical Frameworks Personality Quiz; Workshop**	Prindle Auditorium
11:00AM	**Coffee Break**	Auditorium Lobby
11:15AM	**Case-Based Reasoning and Analysis**	Conference Room (138)
12:30PM	**Lunch Break**	Great Room
1:30PM	**Trolleyology: Or, Reasoning with Moral Principles**	Teaching Lab (152)
3:00PM	**Reflection/Exploration Time** *Optional Activities: Nature Walk; Yoga Class*	DePauw Nature Park
5:00PM	**Discussion: Prindle Institute Resources/Programming**	Conference Room (135)
6:30PM	**Opening Dinner**	Great Room
7:30PM	**S'mores and Conversation**	Outdoor Fire Pit

THURSDAY, JUNE 6

TIME (ET)	EVENT	LOCATION
8:15AM	**Breakfast**	Great Room
9:00AM	**Brainstorm/Discussion: Facilitating Hard Conversations**	Conference Room (138)
10:30AM	**Coffee Break**	Great Room
10:45AM	**Assessment Issues in Ethics Education**	Teaching Lab (152)
11:45AM	**Lunch Break**	Great Room
1:00PM	**Lesson Planning: Individual**	Various
2:30PM	**Reflection/Exploration Time** *Optional Activity: Pickleball*	Robe Ann Park
5:00PM	**Pedagogy Demonstration: Inside Ethics Bowl**	Great Room
6:30PM	**Dinner**	Bridges, Greencastle

FRIDAY, JUNE 6

TIME (ET)	EVENT	LOCATION
8:15AM	**Breakfast**	Great Room
9:00AM	**Models for Classroom Integration**	Teaching Lab (152)
10:30AM	**Lesson Planning: Group**	Prindle Auditorium
12:30PM	**Lunch Break**	Great Room
1:30PM	**Lesson Planning: Group Share**	Wood Library
3:00PM	**Wrap-Up; Closing**	Prindle Auditorium

EVENT CONTACTS

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ABOUT OUR CAMPUS

Named for distinguished alumna Janet Prindle ('58) and dedicated in 2008, the Prindle Institute for Ethics is nestled in the heart of DePauw's Nature Park near the main DePauw University campus in Greencastle, IN. The innovative, sustainable design of the Institute provides a quiet space for students, faculty, and other members of our community to get away from their busy lives to think and talk about the things that matter.

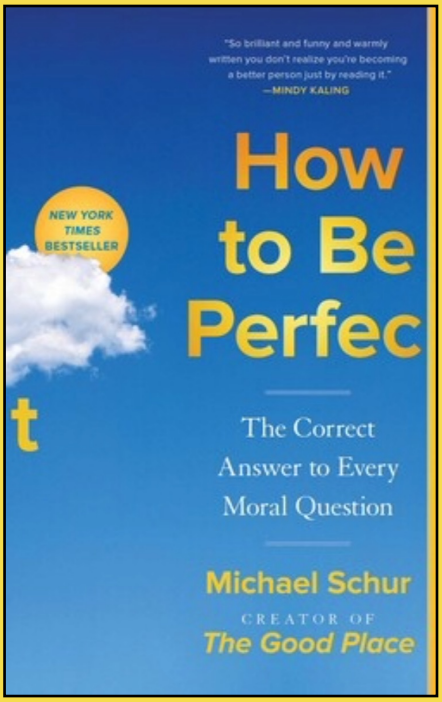
Our spaces are fully ADA accessible. If you require additional accommodations to make your visit more comfortable, please don't hesitate to contact us at **prindleinstitute@depauw.edu**. For more information about our campus, including maps and floorpans for wayfinding assistance, more details about what's on view at the Prindle Institute, and more, please visit **prindleinstitute.org/campus** or scan the QR code below.

Complimentary wi-fi access is provided to guests of the Institute. To connect, simply select the "DePauw Guest" network on your device(s). No password or authentication is required.

PRE-READING

Should I Let This Runaway Trolley I'm Driving Kill Five People, or Should I Pull a Lever and Deliberately Kill One (Different) Person?

Excerpted from **Michael Schur**, *How to Be Perfect: The Correct Answer to Every Moral Question*



CHAPTER TWO

Should I Let This Runaway Trolley I'm Driving Kill Five People, or Should I Pull a Lever and Deliberately Kill One (Different) Person?

Weird question, right? We were just goofing around, talking about *Les Misérables* and YouTube comments, and suddenly we're in some dystopian vehicular psychodrama. Obviously, chances are you've never been in this exact situation, and you probably never will be. But trust me when I say that any understanding of modern ethical decision-making requires you to think very hard about what you would do if you *were* faced with this choice, and more importantly, why you would do it.

So. You're driving a trolley, and the brakes fail. On the track ahead of you are five construction workers who will be smooshed by the runaway trolley—but there's a lever you can pull that will switch the trolley onto another track, on which is *one* construction worker. The questions are obvious: Should you do nothing, allowing five people to be killed? Should you pull the lever, killing one person? Also, why are these people working on active trolley tracks in the middle of the day? Who approved this? Jerry, from scheduling? That guy is so incompetent. I heard he only got this job because his cousin owns the trolley company.

This thought experiment and its many variations (which we'll get to shortly) are collectively called "the Trolley Problem." The original

question was posed in 1967 by a British woman named Philippa Foot.[1] Now, I know what you're thinking: "Philippa Foot" sounds like the name of a fairy-tale mouse who lives inside a purple mushroom in an enchanted forest. But she wasn't a fairy-tale mouse, she was an esteemed philosopher, and the Trolley Problem is arguably modern philosophy's most famous thought experiment. In fact, it's *so* famous and oft-discussed that many academics kind of hate it now—they roll their eyes and look annoyed when it comes up, because it's all anyone has talked about for fifty years. It's like the philosophy version of "Stairway to Heaven" or *The Godfather* or something—an admitted classic that has suffered from overexposure. But suck it up, academic philosophers; we're gonna talk about it, because working through its complexities does a bang-up job of explaining why "doing the right thing" is so difficult.

Most people agree that in the original conception laid out above, we should pull the lever. We give this answer reflexively—it just… seems like the right move. We don't know anything about the people—they're just anonymous construction workers who inexplicably don't find it important to pay attention to the seemingly vital question of whether there might be a trolley bearing down on them—so we ought to save as many as possible, right? We have the chance to do something simple that spares four human lives. Pull that lever, baby, and we'll be heroes!

But hidden in this problem, lurking under the surface, are a whole bunch of booby traps—the troubling places that our answer leads us to once the original scenario is even slightly modified. For example, what if we're not the *driver*, but just an innocent observer, standing next to the tracks where (in this version) the track-switching lever is

located? Now we don't have the same decision-making responsibilities that we might have if we were employed by the trolley company. Would we still pull the lever then? Or what if the potential smooshees aren't anonymous? What if we look out through the front windshield and recognize our friend Susan standing over there on the other track, and because we don't want to kill our friend Susan, who's so nice and thoughtful and once gave us her Beyoncé tickets when she couldn't use them, we actively decide *not* to switch tracks. Is it morally permissible to let five people get killed in order to save our friend Susan's life? Or what if we see Susan standing there on the other track, but not only is she not our friend, we *hate* her? She's condescending and mean and she refused to give us her Beyoncé tickets that one time even though she couldn't use them, and actually we were literally just telling our sister yesterday that sometimes we wish she'd be flattened by a runaway trolley. If we pull the lever now, did we do it because we wanted to save five lives… or because annoying Beyoncé-ticket-hoarding Susan had it coming?

Here's the one that always gets people: What if we're standing on a bridge that spans the tracks, looking down at the runaway trolley, and next to us is a big thick-necked weight lifter[2] named Don, who's leaning waaaay out over the edge of the bridge. We—experts in physics, apparently—calculate that Don is just massive enough so that if the trolley hit him, it would slow down and come to a stop before the five guys got smooshed. Which means all we have to do is shove Don the *teensiest* bit so he falls onto the tracks and *he* gets smooshed, saving five other lives. Would we shove him? Most people draw a line in the sand here, and say no—they wouldn't shove poor Don to his certain death. At which point, whoever is administering

the thought experiment rightly points out that the action and the result are essentially identical: in one scenario we pull a lever, in the other we tip Don off a bridge, but in each case we are knowingly causing the death of one innocent person to save five others. But it *feels* different, right? There's gotta be a difference between pulling a lever from inside a trolley and *physically pushing someone off a bridge*. Also: Be more careful, Don. Stop leaning so far out over the railings of bridges. (None of the people in the Trolley Problem have any awareness of the dangers all around them. It's infuriating.)

We're not nearly done, by the way, with thorny Trolley Problem–related quandaries. What if we're doctors in a hospital, and five people come into the ER needing five different organ transplants or they'll all die: one needs a heart, one a liver, one a lung, one a stomach, and one a… spleen, I guess? Do you need a spleen to live? It doesn't matter. The point is, they all need organs. We, the exhausted doctors on duty tonight, walk to the vending machine to get a soda and see a custodian happily cleaning the floors. Maybe he's singing a little song to himself about how healthy he is, and how it's so cool that all of his organs are functioning perfectly. This gives us a great idea: We'll kill that custodian, harvest his organs, and divvy 'em up. His heart goes to the heart-needing guy, his spleen to the spleen-needing lady, and so on. Everybody wins! (Except for the custodian.)

Again, this seems abhorrent, but in essence it's no different from our action and its results in the original experiment: because of a choice we make, one innocent dies and five innocents live. Almost none of us would agree to that version, however. It's one thing to pull a lever, we think—it's another thing entirely to sneak up behind a singing custodian and garrote him with a piano wire so we can rip

out his spleen. This is why the Trolley Problem is so compelling: our answers to the simple question "Is it okay to do this?" vary widely with each different version, even though the basic act (choosing to kill one person) and its end result (five others live) is always the same.

So… what the hell?

Utilitarianism—A Results-Oriented Business!

We have now arrived at the second of our three main Western philosophical schools: utilitarianism, most famously developed by British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), two deeply weird dudes.

Bentham had many admirable qualities—he argued for gay rights, minority rights, women's rights, and animal rights, which were not things a lot of people argued for in eighteenth-century England. He was also… let's say, "eccentric"? and declared that when he died his body should be given to his friend Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith for use in medical research. Smith preserved Bentham's skeleton, dressed it in one of Bentham's suits (as he had apparently requested), and commissioned a wax replica head when the preservation of Bentham's actual head—and I quote—"did not produce acceptable results." Apparently, in fact, it "went disastrously wrong, robbing the head of most of its facial expression, and leaving it decidedly unattractive." (I have decided not to include any photos of this. You're welcome.) The Bentham skeleton-wax-head contraption is called his "auto-icon," which I suppose is a better name than "nightmare death puppet," and in 1850 Smith donated the auto-icon to University College London, of which Bentham was a sort of

"spiritual founder" (though not an actual one) so they took it in. Hilariously, according to the UCL blog, "The College did not immediately display the auto-icon, much to Smith's disdain." Seems like a real "can you blame them?" type of deal. For decades UCL kept their human scarecrow in a wooden cabinet, but in February 2020 they put it in a freaking glass case in the freaking student center, which I imagine everyone at University College London really enjoys and it doesn't at all make them want to barf.[3]

Bentham's disciple J. S. Mill was also an early women's rights supporter, authoring a groundbreaking work of feminist thought called *The Subjection of Women* in 1869.[4] He learned Greek and Latin by the age of eight, and by the time he was a teenager he had an impressive command of Euclidean math, politics, philosophy, and basically everything else, thanks to an overbearing dad who had some truly intense thoughts on childhood education. By the time he was twenty he was horribly depressed—a predictable outcome if you have the kind of father who made you learn Greek and Latin in kindergarten. Mill pulled out of his funk partly by reading Romantic poetry, which is a very nineteenth-century-British-genius way to pull out of a funk, and went on to become one of his generation's most influential philosophers despite never teaching at a university or even attending one. To cap off his singular life, Mill died in 1873 of St. Anthony's fire, a rare infection where your skin essentially explodes into bright red inflammations. But before his skin exploded, he furthered Bentham's work on the subject of utilitarianism, and brought it to the forefront of Western philosophical thought.

Utilitarianism is one branch of a school of ethical philosophy broadly called "consequentialism," which cares only about the *results* or *consequences* of our actions. The best thing to do, says a consequentialist, is simply the thing that results in the most good and the least bad. Specifically, Bentham's initial phrasing of utilitarianism was that the best action is whatever makes the most people *happy*.[5] He called this the "greatest happiness principle," and it's both invitingly simple and kind of silly.[6] "Who gets to decide what 'happiness' is?" would be one question we might ask, given that some people, like me, are normal and well-adjusted, and other people put pineapple on pizza and enjoy listening to the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Still, consequentialism has undeniable appeal. When I first read about it in college, I thought: "Cool! I *get* this one!" It's an ethical theory that feels *attainable*, because all that matters for any action is the outcome: more overall happiness = better, more overall sadness = worse, so all we have to do is create more pleasure/happiness than we do pain/sadness and we win the ethics contest! Consequentialists give us the comfort of *knowing* that what we did was good or bad, because the answer lies in verifiable results; it's an attempt to take morality out of the abstract and make it more like math, or chemistry. Think of the scene at the end of *Schindler's List*, when Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) laments that he hadn't done enough—that his gold pin could've been traded or sold, and the money then used to save the lives of two more people. Schindler had found a way to rescue persecuted people using his fortune and influence, so every pfennig he spent equaled some percentage of a human life. His moral

calculation was crystal clear. And that's why *Schindler's List* is famously such a pleasant and relaxing movie to watch.

Okay, so, only the results matter. But how do we actually judge the results? If you're Oskar Schindler, and you trade a gold Nazi pin you don't really care about for two human beings, it's pretty easy to figure out that you created more happiness/pleasure (two lives are saved) than pain/sadness (you don't have your cool pin anymore). But most decisions aren't nearly that cut-and-dried. If we're going to judge *all* of our actions on this basis, we need some kind of calculator that can help us determine how many "happiness points" or "sadness demerits" each act creates. So, Bentham invented one. He came up with seven scales we should use to measure the pleasure created by anything we do:

Intensity (how strong it is)
Duration (how long it lasts)
Certainty (how definite it is that it'll work)
Propinquity (how soon it can happen)
Fecundity (how "lasting" it is—how much other pleasure it can lead to)
Purity (how little pain it causes in relation to the pleasure it creates)
Extent (how many people it benefits)

Two things are clear. First, it is *impossible* to look at that list and not make jokes about utilitarianism being like sex. I mean, come on. "Intensity," "how long it lasts," "how much other pleasure it can lead to"—if you read that section and did not immediately make a joke about Jeremy Bentham being history's horniest philosopher, you're a

better person than I am. But second: this calculator stinks. How are we actually supposed to apply these scales to the things we do? How can we calculate the "fecundity" of loaning a coworker twenty bucks, or the "purity" of eating a fried turkey leg at a state fair? Bentham even suggested new terminology for our measurements: "hedons" for units of pleasure, and "dolors" for units of pain. This dude wanted us to walk around and say things like, "By my calculation, buying produce from a local farmers market instead of a large national chain creates 3.7 hedons and only 1.6 dolors, and thus it is a good action." Doesn't seem plausible. But Bentham—who, it should again be noted, had his skeleton stapled to a chair and permanently displayed in a famous university—clearly believes in his system, and writes about it with great conviction. He even made up a cute little rhyme to help guide us:

> Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—
> Such marks in pleasures and in pains endure.
> Such pleasures seek if private be thy end:
> If it be public, wide let them extend.
> Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view:
> If pains must come, let them extend to few.

And you know what? Despite all of the problems we've already noted with the greatest happiness principle, that ghoulish human taxidermy experiment had a point. If you knew nothing about morality and all you did was follow Bentham's little rhyme, you'd be a pretty decent person. When we create pleasure or pain, he says, those sensations can be defined by how intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, and pure they are. If you're acting only for yourself, go ahead

and seek pleasures however you want—but if you're acting publicly, aim to spread as much pleasure around as you can.[7] Avoid causing pain whenever possible, but if you can't, do your best to limit the amount of pain people experience. That ain't half bad. The main thing Bentham and the other utilitarians have going for them is their overriding concern for other people, and their belief that all people's happiness matters equally. *My* happiness is no more special than *anyone else*'s, they said, which essentially eliminates the concept of elitism. The utilitarian cruise ship has no first class section reserved for the wealthiest passengers—everyone's room is the same size, and everyone eats from the same buffet.

So… is utilitarianism the answer?

No. Utilitarianism Is Not "the Answer" (in Many Situations).

Unfortunately, any stress test that we perform on utilitarianism can reveal crucial weaknesses in its central tenets. If all that matters is maximizing happiness and minimizing pain, we quickly arrive at some gnarly conclusions—like, say, that a doctor could go ahead and strangle an innocent custodian in order to hand out his organs to five needy patients. Bentham's greatest happiness principle also suggests that if a pig has enough pig slop and mud to roll around in, the pig is "happier" (and thus, more "successful" in its life) than, say, Socrates, who was maybe a brilliant thinker but also annoyed everyone in Athens so much that his government threw him in jail and made him drink hemlock and die. Any ethical theory that suggests a muddy pig had a happier and better life than one of humanity's greatest thinkers is in trouble right off the bat, probably.[8]

Indeed, ever since Bentham introduced utilitarianism to the world, philosophers have delighted in designing thought experiments to reveal how flimsy it can be. Here's one I like:[9] Imagine there's an electrician (let's call him Steve) working on a transformer at ESPN during a World Cup soccer match. Steve slips and falls behind the transformer—just gets really wedged in there—and the electrical equipment starts repeatedly jolting him. We could get Steve free, but doing so would require that we shut the transformer down for a few minutes, interrupting the broadcast. The strict consequentialist makes an easy call here: tens of millions of people would be *so sad* if the feed gets cut, so, sorry, Steve, you'll just have to stay there and get continuously zapped until your bones are visible through your skin like in cartoons. But that answer leaves us cold. It feels wrong to let poor innocent Steve suffer so others can be happy. That's what a lot of the problems with consequentialism boil down to, really—sometimes it simply *feels* like the conclusion we come to, when we tally up the total "pleasure" and "pain" resulting from a decision, just can't be right.

Now, utilitarians had a clever response to this: If we conclude that some action created more good than bad, but it seems like this action can't possibly be morally permissible, well… that just means we did the calculation wrong. When we're totaling up the good and bad of the action, we have to consider the entire picture; that is, how much pain would be caused not just to the one innocent person who suffered, but to *all* people, who now know that this has happened *and* that our society has deemed it permissible—which means the same thing could theoretically happen to them. Hearing that we let Steve get zapped like the robber in *Home Alone 2* when he touches Kevin's

booby-trapped, electrified sink just so we could watch a soccer match would thus make *a lot of people* at least *a little bit* miserable, so we have to add their psychological and emotional pain to Steve's actual physical pain, which makes the total amount of "bad" far greater than we at first thought. This is both a brilliant defense and a total cop-out, because anytime a utilitarian calculation leads to an unpleasant conclusion, the utilitarian can just tell us we did the math wrong.

And even if we do factor in the nebulous amount of pain/sadness caused to the world at large by letting Steve be zapped, a consequentialist might *still* let it happen. I mean, sure: Theoretically, everyone now knows that our society permits such things and is thus aware that it may happen to them someday… but honestly, what are the chances this *would* happen to any of us? We're not electricians, we don't work at ESPN—we might (correctly) write this off as a freak accident. Plus, Steve must have understood the risks when he took the job of "transformer fixer"—*all* jobs carry *some* risk. So the strict consequentialist might do a thorough calculation of hedons and dolors and *still* decide that it's cool to just leave Steve there, vibrating like a tuning fork, so we can all watch the last eight minutes of the Brazil-France semifinal. Sorting out these broader, secondary pleasure/pain implications can be a maddeningly inexact science.

Another problem: determining the results of our actions requires that we understand the link between those actions and their results —that we actually *did* what we think we did—which is frequently not the case. If there's one thing people are bad at, it's drawing the correct conclusion from a given result.[10] Often we do things whose consequences we can't determine for a long time. Sometimes we

can't tell the difference between causation—we did *this thing*, which caused *that result*—and correlation—we did *this thing*, and also that other thing *happened*, but they're not related. (Sports fans, for example, often wear a certain jersey or sit in a specific viewing location in their living room because at some level they think it helps their team win—which of course it does not.[11],[12],[13]) It's awfully hard to determine how much good or bad we've created if we don't even truly understand what we've "done."

Here's an example. Let's say we're trying to achieve some kind of good—we're teachers, and we want our students to get better test scores. To increase their motivation, we tell them that if the average grade on the next math test is above an eighty, we'll give them each a prize: one big puffy marshmallow! Some of the kids like marshmallows, so they study harder. Some hate marshmallows, and they study less. Some are indifferent, so they study the same amount. And some are so incredulous at how boneheaded an idea this is, they conclude that their teachers are irredeemable goobers and they need to transfer to another school—so they study harder than they ever have before, and all ace the test. At the end of the day, the average grade is an eighty-two, and we high-five each other because we think we've solved the problem of student motivation: offer everyone a marshmallow! Our findings are published in *Awesome Teacher Magazine* with a picture of us holding a bag of marshmallows under the headline: "What's Their Sweet-cret?! These Teachers Know How to Get S'more out of Their Students!"

We just learned a bad lesson from a good outcome—we think offering our students marshmallows helped to achieve a greater good, but in fact they largely achieved the intended result *despite* our

action, and we're now inclined to continue doing something that actually makes us *worse* teachers. The great majority of human actions involve incomplete information, either on the front end (before we do it) or on the back end (when we observe the results), so determining the moral value of an action based on the results seems like a risky proposition. (And worse, a true consequentialist might not even care that the result was achieved in an unintended way—we got the result we wanted, so who cares how it happened?) If we're declaring an action "good" or "bad" based on its results, and results are often impossible to fully understand… where does that leave us? And doesn't "pulling the lever" on the trolley seem a bit riskier now?

Two More Problems for Utilitarianism: Hedonists and Murderous Sheriffs

Let's head back to the Trolley Problem, to better understand why we *feel* differently as we make our way through the variations, even when the big-picture utilitarian calculation keeps spitting out the same instructions. Remember that when we approach the original question, we unconsciously respond as utilitarians: saving more people = good. But should we shove Don the weight lifter off a bridge to stop the train? Well, no, say most people. "Why not?" ask the knowing Philosophy 101 professors, springing their trap—"You're still choosing to kill one person to save five." "Because it just *feels* different," we reply weakly. What about killing one healthy person and harvesting his organs to save five people who need organ transplants? "No way," we say. Doing that would make us feel like we're not even *ourselves*—like we're the bad guy in a movie starring

Don Cheadle and Rachel McAdams as detectives in search of the infamous "Utilitarian Killer."[14] I suspect the reason for the inconsistency is somewhat related to those teachers and their marshmallow experiment; the utilitarian answering the "Trolley Problem Classic" might arrive at the right answer for the wrong reason. Maybe it *is* morally correct to pull the lever and save the five people… but not just because "five is greater than one."

As I mentioned, when Mill and Bentham brought utilitarianism into the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it drove philosophers batty—much of the academic world angrily rejected the idea that ethics could be a results-only enterprise. Their critiques are really fun to read, because they're as close as philosophers get to trash-talking.[15] In 1945, Bertrand Russell[16]—who as it happens was J. S. Mill's godson—published *A History of Western Philosophy*, an impressive survey of everything from the pre-Socratic Greeks to twentieth-century logicians. Although Russell was fond of his godfather and found both his intellectual prowess and his deeply moral life admirable, the section Russell wrote on the utilitarians oozes disdain. "There is nothing new in this doctrine," he sniffs, and later adds that "the influence of the Benthamites on British legislation and policy was astonishingly great, considering their complete absence of emotional appeal." Among his other thoughts:

There is an obvious lacuna in Bentham's system.

and

> His optimism was therefore perhaps excusable, but in our more disillusioned age it seems somewhat naïve.

and

> John Stuart Mill, in his *Utilitarianism*, offers an argument which is so fallacious that it is hard to understand how he can have thought it valid.

and

> Jeremy Bentham was an ignorant fool and should I ever visit University College London I shall rip off his wax head and fling it into the Thames.

Fine—he didn't write that last one, but you get the idea. He didn't like utilitarianism. He summarizes his displeasure this way:

> Anything whatever may be an object of desire; a masochist may desire his own pain.… A man may desire something that does not affect him personally except because of his desire—for instance, the victory of one side in a war in which his country is neutral. He may desire an increase of general happiness, or a mitigation of general suffering.… As his desires vary, so do his pleasures.

Russell, whom I imagine writing this section of his book while clenching his fountain pen so hard it eventually snaps in half,

touches on a decent point here. The utilitarian focus on total amounts of pleasure or pain makes us think about the potentially massive differences among the people who are experiencing the pleasure and pain. Remember earlier when I mentioned that some people, like me, are normal and well-adjusted, and other people, who are not, enjoy Hawaiian pizza (which, if you don't know, is topped with pineapple and ham)? Well, what if I'm running a pizza shop and encounter you, a weirdo who loves Hawaiian pizza—in fact, you love it *so deeply and thoroughly* that the amount of pleasure you get from it is just off the charts? One slice of Hawaiian pizza sends you into an orgasmic reverie—just buckets of hedons dripping off your forehead—so that the "total pleasure" of you eating one slice of Hawaiian is greater than the total pleasure of everyone else eating normal pizza. If I'm being a good little utilitarian, shouldn't I stop making normal (good) pizza in order to devote my life to making Hawaiian (crime against nature) pizza, solely to benefit you and create more pleasure? [17]

Utilitarianism often runs into problems like this, because human beings, it turns out, are *weird*, so searching for actions that create the most "total happiness" can create bizarre situations. It doesn't seem fair to prefer a ton of pleasure for one Hawaiian pizza–loving sociopath over smaller pleasures for a large number of more decent and stable people, who understand that the proper places for ham and pineapple are in sandwiches and fruit salads, respectively. Other times, utilitarians do the reverse, making rules that seem to eliminate the peculiarities of each individual and congeal all human happiness or sadness into giant clumps. That's hard to swallow too, given that the differences in what makes people happy are beautiful

and interesting—they're the very things that make us *us*. To some of its critics, utilitarianism isn't really even ethics—it's math. And if someone complains about the result, a utilitarian points to the fact that more people are happy than sad and yells, "Scoreboard!" like a drunk football fan whose team is winning.

One of my favorite anti-utilitarian thought experiments—the one that really helps explain the Trolley Problem weirdness—comes from Bernard Williams (1929–2003), another British[18] philosopher, who designed the following (paraphrased) scenario. It's a close cousin of both "Steve the Zappee at ESPN" and the Trolley Problem, but his analysis puts an even finer point on Russell's critique:

Jim is vacationing in a small town in some distant part of the country, and he happens upon the local sheriff, Pete, who is pointing a gun at ten residents.[19] Pete tells Jim that here in this town they do a super-fun thing to maintain law and order: every so often they kill ten people at random, just to remind everyone who's boss. But now that Jim is here, it's a special occasion, so if Jim agrees, he—Jim—can shoot just *one* of the locals, and that will serve as the weekly "lesson." (Before you ask, it's also clear that Jim can't like grab the gun and pull some cool Jason Bourne moves on Pete and let everyone go free.) For the utilitarian, the solution is obvious: Jim should kill the one local and save nine lives. But the problem, for Williams, is that this utilitarian answer ignores *Jim*. What becomes of a man who was out for a nice walk and then stumbled into a situation where he was forced to murder an innocent person in cold blood, simply to achieve some kind of maximal hedon/dolor ratio? How does Jim just go back to his normal life?

Williams uses the word *integrity* to attack the utilitarians—less in the sense of "honesty and moral uprightness" than "wholeness," or "undividedness." He says that their worldview causes a crack in the basic foundation of an individual's being—the sense that "each of us is specially responsible for what he does, rather than for what other people do." Ten people might die because Sheriff Pete thinks mass murder is a good way to maintain law and order—but that's on Pete. If Jim kills a guy, *that's on Jim*, even if he does it for the sake of some kind of "greater good." Jim's integrity has to matter, at some level—his sense of being a holistic entity who's not required to compromise himself by acting in a way that divides him into parts, some of which he won't recognize as his own. Jim has to think it's permissible *for him*—not just for "someone"—to shoot an innocent person if it saves nine others, or to shove a weight lifter off a bridge if it stops a runaway trolley. It might be that the morally right thing to do is in fact to kill the one local. But in the utilitarian's mind, it's simply a numbers game, and for Williams, numbers can't be the only factor.

We'll come back to the Trolley Problem in the next chapter (and get more explanations for our inconsistent responses), but for now, let's just be content with this notion: when we're confronting moral dilemmas, especially ones where serious pain and suffering result from our actions, relying solely on utilitarian accounting is bound to cause significant problems—there are other factors here, not least among them our *integrity*, and ignoring those factors may result in our doing things we really don't feel are the right things to do. And even if our personal formulation of the right action happens to line up with a utilitarian worldview, that doesn't necessarily mean the utilitarian worldview is the *reason* it's the right action.

Enough Picking on Utilitarians—Let's Focus on the Positives!

Most of the thought experiments invented to attack consequentialism involve having to do something awful to prevent something *more* awful from happening; the best way to exploit the flaws in a "numbers game" theory is to design scenarios where people suffer no matter what you decide to do. But to let the utilitarians off the hook a little, we should note that their theory often holds up far better when we're simply trying to maximize good. Put runaway trolleys and murderous sheriffs aside for a second and consider a more common real-life situation: a hurricane damages a city, and a food bank containing one thousand meals needs to decide how to divide them up. The utilitarian would simply aim to spread the food around to as many people as possible, starting with those who had been hurt the most by the storm or were in the greatest need—because we'd create more pleasure by giving those people food than if we gave it to people who were only lightly inconvenienced. That's a pretty good system! The complications arise when you run into those weird pleasure-monster requests; like, maybe there's one guy named Lars who claims he should get one hundred of the meals for himself, because he's composing an emo-rock opera based on the movie *Avatar* that will take months to complete, so he needs a lot of food to keep his creative juices flowing. Well, this is just great—now the utilitarian has to calculate how much pleasure Lars will get from completing his emo-rock opera, and how much pleasure other people will get from hearing it.[20] Suddenly, what seemed like a straightforward distribution model gets all gunked up. It's unlikely (absent other factors)[21] that giving one-tenth of the available food to some James Cameron–worshipping

Fall Out Boy superfan is ethically preferable, but if we're being good little utilitarians, we have to go through the process of thinking it all through and recalculating, which is difficult and annoying.

Consequentialism has recently seen a resurgence in the world of moral philosophy. This may be due to something endemic to the modern world, like income disparity hitting all-time highs, which has refocused academic attention on the misappropriation of capital. Or maybe the world's problems have just become so massive, the population so enormous, and the questions of how we treat each other so urgent, a philosophy that simply aims to help as many needy people as much as we can makes more sense in moral terms than it did in simpler, less populous times. Quite literally *as I write this*, governments everywhere are deciding how to administer the various Covid-19 vaccines, which (at least at first) are in limited supply. Those calculations are indisputably utilitarian—they prioritize those most likely to get very ill or die, as well as people whose jobs put them at higher risk. The "good" of each dose is therefore maximized, because each one alleviates the most potential pain and unhappiness—we'd be hard-pressed to find a school of philosophy that could describe a better way to vaccinate the public against this disease. While a purely results-based philosophy can create a lot of problems, there are clearly situations that greatly benefit from caring only about how much pleasure we can create[22] and how little pain.

But we also saw that determining the moral value of our actions based solely on their results can be impossible, or misleading, or hard to calculate, or all three. So… what if we ignore the results? What if we can determine the moral worth of what we do *before* we do it? What if, faced with a choice between killing one person or five,

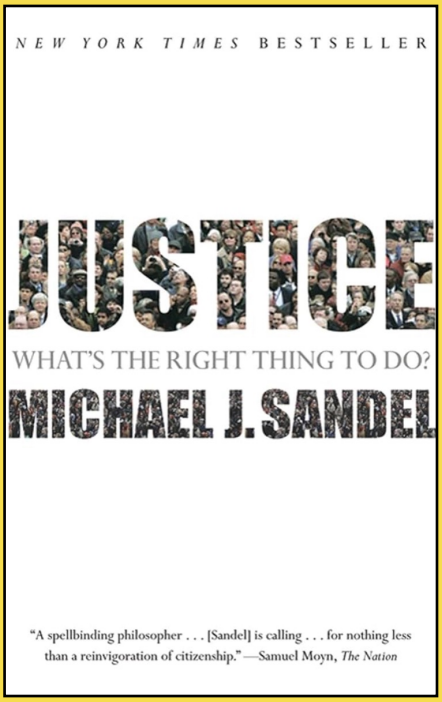
there were some kind of rule we could follow that would guarantee we acted correctly *regardless of the result*? And what if we could go back to that Universe Goodness Accountant from the introduction, who tsk-tsked us for all the bad results we got, and say, "Hey, lady—we don't care if our day of good deeds got all screwed up, because we *meant* to do good things and only our *intentions* determine our moral worth"? Wouldn't that feel good, to rub it in her face a little?

Buckle up, people. It's Kant time.

PRE-READING

What Matters Is the Motive: Immanuel Kant

Excerpted from **Michael Sandel**, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*



5. WHAT MATTERS IS THE MOTIVE / IMMANUEL KANT

If you believe in universal human rights, you are probably not a utilitarian. If all human beings are worthy of respect, regardless of who they are or where they live, then it's wrong to treat them as mere instruments of the collective happiness. (Recall the story of the malnourished child languishing in the cellar for the sake of the "city of happiness.")

You might defend human rights on the grounds that respecting them will maximize utility in the long run. In that case, however, your reason for respecting rights is not to respect the person who holds them but to make things better for everyone. It is one thing to condemn the scenario of the suffering child because it reduces overall utility, and something else to condemn it as an intrinsic moral wrong, an injustice to the child.

If rights don't rest on utility, what is their moral basis? Libertarians offer a possible answer: Persons should not be used merely as means to the welfare of others, because doing so violates the fundamental right of self-ownership. My life, labor, and person belong to me and me alone. They are not at the disposal of the society as a whole.

As we have seen, however, the idea of self-ownership, consistently applied, has implications that only an ardent libertarian can love—an unfettered market without a safety net for those who fall behind; a

minimal state that rules out most measures to ease inequality and promote the common good; and a celebration of consent so complete that it permits self-inflicted affronts to human dignity such as consensual cannibalism or selling oneself into slavery.

Even John Locke (1632–1704), the great theorist of property rights and limited government, does not assert an unlimited right of self-possession. He rejects the notion that we may dispose of our life and liberty however we please. But Locke's theory of unalienable rights invokes God, posing a problem for those who seek a moral basis for rights that does not rest on religious assumptions.

Kant's Case for Rights

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) offers an alternative account of duties and rights, one of the most powerful and influential accounts any philosopher has produced. It does not depend on the idea that we own ourselves, or on the claim that our lives and liberties are a gift from God. Instead, it depends on the idea that we are rational beings, worthy of dignity and respect.

Kant was born in the East Prussian city of Konigsberg in 1724, and died there, almost eighty years later. He came from a family of modest means. His father was a harness-maker and his parents were Pietists, members of a Protestant faith that emphasized the inner religious life and the doing of good works.[1]

He excelled at the University of Konigsberg, which he entered at age sixteen. For a time, he worked as a private tutor, and then, at thirty-one, he received his first academic job, as an unsalaried lecturer, for which he was paid based on the number of students who showed up at his lectures. He was a popular and industrious lecturer, giving about twenty lectures a week on subjects including metaphysics, logic, ethics, law, geography, and anthropology.

In 1781, at age fifty-seven, he published his first major book, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which challenged the empiricist theory of

knowledge associated with David Hume and John Locke. Four years later, he published the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, the first of his several works on moral philosophy. Five years after Jeremy Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780), Kant's *Groundwork* launched a devastating critique of utilitarianism. It argues that morality is not about maximizing happiness or any other end. Instead, it is about respecting persons as ends in themselves.

Kant's *Groundwork* appeared shortly after the American Revolution (1776) and just before the French Revolution (1789). In line with the spirit and moral thrust of those revolutions, it offers a powerful basis for what the eighteenth-century revolutionaries called the rights of man, and what we in the early twenty-first century call universal human rights.

Kant's philosophy is hard going. But don't let that scare you away. It is worth the effort, because the stakes are enormous. The *Groundwork* takes up a big question: What is the supreme principle of morality? And in the course of answering that question, it addresses another hugely important one: What is freedom?

Kant's answers to these questions have loomed over moral and political philosophy ever since. But his historical influence is not the only reason to pay attention to him. Daunting though Kant's philosophy may seem at first glance, it actually informs much contemporary thinking about morality and politics, even if we are unaware of it. So making sense of Kant is not only a philosophical exercise; it is also a way of examining some of the key assumptions implicit in our public life.

Kant's emphasis on human dignity informs present-day notions of universal human rights. More important, his account of freedom figures in many of our contemporary debates about justice. In the introduction to this book, I distinguished three approaches to justice. One approach, that of the utilitarians, says that the way to define justice and to determine the right thing to do is to ask what will maximize welfare, or the collective happiness of society as a whole. A second approach connects justice to freedom. Libertarians offer an example of

this approach. They say the just distribution of income and wealth is whatever distribution arises from the free exchange of goods and services in an unfettered market. To regulate the market is unjust, they maintain, because it violates the individual's freedom of choice. A third approach says that justice means giving people what they morally deserve—allocating goods to reward and promote virtue. As we will see when we turn to Aristotle (in Chapter 8), the virtue-based approach connects justice to reflection about the good life.

Kant rejects approach one (maximizing welfare) and approach three (promoting virtue). Neither, he thinks, respects human freedom. So Kant is a powerful advocate for approach two—the one that connects justice and morality to freedom. But the idea of freedom he puts forth is demanding—more demanding than the freedom of choice we exercise when buying and selling goods on the market. What we commonly think of as market freedom or consumer choice is not true freedom, Kant argues, because it simply involves satisfying desires we haven't chosen in the first place.

In a moment, we'll come to Kant's more exalted idea of freedom. But before we do, let's see why he thinks the utilitarians are wrong to think of justice and morality as a matter of maximizing happiness.

The Trouble with Maximizing Happiness

Kant rejects utilitarianism. By resting rights on a calculation about what will produce the greatest happiness, he argues, utilitarianism leaves rights vulnerable. There is also a deeper problem: trying to derive moral principles from the desires we happen to have is the wrong way to think about morality. Just because something gives many people pleasure doesn't make it right. The mere fact that the majority, however big, favors a certain law, however intensely, does not make the law just.

Kant argues that morality can't be based on merely empirical considerations, such as the interests, wants, desires, and preferences people

have at any given time. These factors are variable and contingent, he points out, so they could hardly serve as the basis for universal moral principles—such as universal human rights. But Kant's more fundamental point is that basing moral principles on preferences and desires—even the desire for happiness—misunderstands what morality is about. The utilitarian's happiness principle "contributes nothing whatever toward establishing morality, since making a man happy is quite different from making him good and making him prudent or astute in seeking his advantage quite different from making him virtuous."[2] Basing morality on interests and preferences destroys its dignity. It doesn't teach us how to distinguish right from wrong, but "only to become better at calculation."[3]

If our wants and desires can't serve as the basis of morality, what's left? One possibility is God. But that is not Kant's answer. Although he was a Christian, Kant did not base morality on divine authority. He argues instead that we can arrive at the supreme principle of morality through the exercise of what he calls "pure practical reason." To see how, according to Kant, we can reason our way to the moral law, let's now explore the close connection, as Kant sees it, between our capacity for reason and our capacity for freedom.

Kant argues that every person is worthy of respect, not because we own ourselves but because we are rational beings, capable of reason; we are also autonomous beings, capable of acting and choosing freely.

Kant doesn't mean that we always succeed in acting rationally, or in choosing autonomously. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. He means only that we have the capacity for reason, and for freedom, and that this capacity is common to human beings as such.

Kant readily concedes that our capacity for reason is not the only capacity we possess. We also have the capacity to feel pleasure and pain. Kant recognizes that we are sentient creatures as well as rational ones. By "sentient," Kant means that we respond to our senses, our feelings. So Bentham was right—but only half right. He was right to observe that we like pleasure and dislike pain. But he was wrong to insist that

they are "our sovereign masters." Kant argues that reason can be sovereign, at least some of the time. When reason governs our will, we are not driven by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Our capacity for reason is bound up with our capacity for freedom. Taken together, these capacities make us distinctive, and set us apart from mere animal existence. They make us more than mere creatures of appetite.

What Is Freedom?

To make sense of Kant's moral philosophy, we need to understand what he means by freedom. We often think of freedom as the absence of obstacles to doing what we want. Kant disagrees. He has a more stringent, demanding notion of freedom.

Kant reasons as follows: When we, like animals, seek pleasure or the avoidance of pain, we aren't really acting freely. We are acting as the slaves of our appetites and desires. Why? Because whenever we are seeking to satisfy our desires, everything we do is for the sake of some end given outside us. I go this way to assuage my hunger, that way to slake my thirst.

Suppose I'm trying to decide what flavor of ice cream to order: Should I go for chocolate, vanilla, or espresso toffee crunch? I may think of myself as exercising freedom of choice, but what I'm really doing is trying to figure out which flavor will best satisfy my preferences—preferences I didn't choose in the first place. Kant doesn't say it's wrong to satisfy our preferences. His point is that, when we do so, we are not acting freely, but acting according to a determination given outside us. After all, I didn't choose my desire for espresso toffee crunch rather than vanilla. I just have it.

Some years ago, Sprite had an advertising slogan: "Obey your thirst." Sprite's ad contained (inadvertently, no doubt) a Kantian insight. When I pick up a can of Sprite (or Pepsi or Coke), I act out of

obedience, not freedom. I am responding to a desire I haven't chosen. I am obeying my thirst.

People often argue over the role of nature and nurture in shaping behavior. Is the desire for Sprite (or other sugary drinks) inscribed in the genes or induced by advertising? For Kant, this debate is beside the point. Whenever my behavior is biologically determined or socially conditioned, it is not truly free. To act freely, according to Kant, is to act autonomously. And to act autonomously is to act according to a law I give myself—not according to the dictates of nature or social convention.

One way of understanding what Kant means by acting autonomously is to contrast autonomy with its opposite. Kant invents a word to capture this contrast—*heteronomy*. When I act heteronomously, I act according to determinations given outside of me. Here is an illustration: When you drop a billiard ball, it falls to the ground. As it falls, the billiard ball is not acting freely; its movement is governed by the laws of nature—in this case, the law of gravity.

Suppose that I fall (or am pushed) from the Empire State Building. As I hurtle toward the earth, no one would say that I am acting freely; my movement is governed by the law of gravity, as with the billiard ball.

Now suppose I land on another person and kill that person. I would not be morally responsible for the unfortunate death, any more than the billiard ball would be morally responsible if it fell from a great height and hit someone on the head. In neither case is the falling object—me or the billiard ball—acting freely. In both cases, the falling object is governed by the law of gravity. Since there is no autonomy, there can be no moral responsibility.

Here, then, is the link between freedom as autonomy and Kant's idea of morality. To act freely is not to choose the best means to a given end; it is to choose the end itself, for its own sake—a choice that human beings can make and billiard balls (and most animals) cannot.

Persons and Things

It is 3:00 a.m., and your college roommate asks you why you are up late pondering moral dilemmas involving runaway trolleys.

"To write a good paper in Ethics 101," you reply.

"But why write a good paper?" your roommate asks.

"To get a good grade."

"But why care about grades?"

"To get a job in investment banking."

"But why get a job in investment banking?"

"To become a hedge fund manager someday."

"But why be a hedge fund manager?"

"To make a lot of money."

"But why make a lot of money?"

"To eat lobster often, which I like. I am, after all, a sentient creature. *That's* why I'm up late thinking about runaway trolleys!"

This is an example of what Kant would call heteronomous determination—doing something for the sake of something else, for the sake of something else, and so on. When we act heteronomously, we act for the sake of ends given outside us. We are instruments, not authors, of the purposes we pursue.

Kant's notion of autonomy stands in stark contrast to this. When we act autonomously, according to a law we give ourselves, we do something for its own sake, as an end in itself. We cease to be instruments of purposes given outside us. This capacity to act autonomously is what gives human life its special dignity. It marks out the difference between persons and things.

For Kant, respecting human dignity means treating persons as ends in themselves. This is why it is wrong to use people for the sake of the general welfare, as utilitarianism does. Pushing the heavy man onto the track to block the trolley uses him as a means, and so fails to respect him as an end in himself. An enlightened utilitarian (such as Mill) may refuse to push the man, out of concern for secondary effects that would

diminish utility in the long run. (People would soon be afraid to stand on bridges, etc.) But Kant would maintain that this is the wrong reason to desist from pushing. It still treats the would-be victim as an instrument, an object, a mere means to the happiness of others. It lets him live, not for his own sake, but so that other people can cross bridges without a second thought.

This raises the question of what gives an action moral worth. It takes us from Kant's specially demanding idea of freedom to his equally demanding notion of morality.

What's Moral? Look for the Motive

According to Kant, the moral worth of an action consists not in the consequences that flow from it, but in the intention from which the act is done. What matters is the motive, and the motive must be of a certain kind. What matters is doing the right thing because it's right, not for some ulterior motive.

"A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes," Kant writes. It is good in itself, whether or not it prevails. "Even if . . . this will is entirely lacking in power to carry out its intentions; if by its utmost effort it still accomplishes nothing . . . even then it would still shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself."[4]

For any action to be morally good, "it is not enough that it should *conform* to the moral law—it must also be done for the sake of the moral law."[5] And the motive that confers moral worth on an action is the motive of duty, by which Kant means doing the right thing for the right reason.[6]

In saying that only the motive of duty confers moral worth on an action, Kant is not yet saying what particular duties we have. He is not yet telling us what the supreme principle of morality commands. He's simply observing that, when we assess the moral worth of an action, we assess the motive from which it's done, not the consequences it produces.[6]

If we act out of some motive other than duty, such as self-interest, for example, our action lacks moral worth. This is true, Kant maintains, not only for self-interest but for any and all attempts to satisfy our wants, desires, preferences, and appetites. Kant contrasts motives such as these—he calls them "motives of inclination"—with the motive of duty. And he insists that only actions done out of the motive of duty have moral worth.

The calculating shopkeeper and the Better Business Bureau

Kant offers several examples that bring out the difference between duty and inclination. The first involves a prudent shopkeeper. An inexperienced customer, say, a child, goes into a grocery store to buy a loaf of bread. The grocer could overcharge him—charge him more than the usual price for a loaf of bread—and the child would not know. But the grocer realizes that, if others discovered he took advantage of the child in this way, word might spread and hurt his business. For this reason, he decides not to overcharge the child. He charges him the usual price. So the shopkeeper does the right thing, but for the wrong reason. The only reason he deals honestly with the child is to protect his reputation. The shopkeeper acts honestly only for the sake of self-interest; the shopkeeper's action lacks moral worth.[7]

A modern-day parallel to Kant's prudent shopkeeper can be found in the recruiting campaign of the Better Business Bureau of New York. Seeking to enlist new members, the BBB sometimes runs a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with the headline "Honesty is the best policy. It's also the most profitable." The text of the ad leaves no mistake about the motive being appealed to.

> Honesty. It's as important as any other asset. Because a business that deals in truth, openness, and fair value cannot help but do well. It is toward this end [that] we support the Better Business Bureau. Come join us. And profit from it.

Kant would not condemn the Better Business Bureau; promoting honest business dealing is commendable. But there is an important moral difference between honesty for its own sake and honesty for the sake of the bottom line. The first is a principled position, the second a prudential one. Kant argues that only the principled position is in line with the motive of duty, the only motive that confers moral worth on an action.

Or consider this example: Some years ago, the University of Maryland sought to combat a widespread cheating problem by asking students to sign pledges not to cheat. As an inducement, students who took the pledge were offered a discount card good for savings of 10 to 25 percent at local shops.[8] No one knows how many students promised not to cheat for the sake of a discount at the local pizza place. But most of us would agree that bought honesty lacks moral worth. (The discounts might or might not succeed in reducing the incidence of cheating; the moral question, however, is whether honesty motivated by the desire for a discount or a monetary reward has moral worth. Kant would say no.)

These cases bring out the plausibility of Kant's claim that only the motive of duty—doing something because it's right, not because it's useful or convenient—confers moral worth on an action. But two further examples bring out a complexity in Kant's claim.

Staying alive

The first involves the duty, as Kant sees it, to preserve one's own life. Since most people have a strong inclination to continue living, this duty rarely comes into play. Most of the precautions we take to preserve our lives therefore lack moral content. Buckling our seat belts and keeping our cholesterol in check are prudential acts, not moral ones.

Kant acknowledges that it is often difficult to know what motivates people to act as they do. And he recognizes that motives of duty and

inclination may both be present. His point is that only the motive of duty—doing something because it's right, not because it's useful or pleasing or convenient—confers moral worth on an action. He illustrates this point with the example of suicide.

Most people go on living because they love life, not because they have a duty to do so. Kant offers a case where the motive of duty comes into view. He imagines a hopeless, miserable person so filled with despair that he has no desire to go on living. If such a person summons the will to preserve his life, not from inclination but from duty, then his action has moral worth.[9]

Kant does not maintain that only miserable people can fulfill the duty to preserve their lives. It is possible to love life and still preserve it for the right reason—namely, that one has a duty to do so. The desire to go on living doesn't undermine the moral worth of preserving one's life, provided the person recognizes the duty to preserve his or her own life, and does so with this reason in mind.

The moral misanthrope

Perhaps the hardest case for Kant's view involves what he takes to be the duty to help others. Some people are altruistic. They feel compassion for others and take pleasure in helping them. But for Kant, doing good deeds out of compassion, "however right and however amiable it may be," lacks moral worth. This may seem counterintuitive. Isn't it good to be the kind of person who takes pleasure in helping others? Kant would say yes. He certainly doesn't think there is anything wrong with acting out of compassion. But he distinguishes between this motive for helping others—that doing the good deed gives me pleasure—and the motive of duty. And he maintains that only the motive of duty confers moral worth on an action. The compassion of the altruist "deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem."[10]

What, then, would it take for a good deed to have moral worth?

Kant offers a scenario: Imagine that our altruist suffers a misfortune that extinguishes his love of humanity. He becomes a misanthrope who lacks all sympathy and compassion. But this cold-hearted soul tears himself out of his indifference and comes to the aid of his fellow human beings. Lacking any inclination to help, he does so "for the sake of duty alone." Now, for the first time, his action has moral worth.[11]

This seems in some ways an odd judgment. Does Kant mean to valorize misanthropes as moral exemplars? No, not exactly. Taking pleasure in doing the right thing does not necessarily undermine its moral worth. What matters, Kant tells us, is that the good deed be done because it's the right thing to do—whether or not doing it gives us pleasure.

The spelling bee hero

Consider an episode that took place some years ago at the national spelling bee in Washington, D.C. A thirteen-year-old boy was asked to spell *echolalia*, a word that means a tendency to repeat whatever one hears. Although he misspelled the word, the judges misheard him, told him he had spelled the word right, and allowed him to advance. When the boy learned that he had misspelled the word, he went to the judges and told them. He was eliminated after all. Newspaper headlines the next day proclaimed the honest young man a "spelling bee hero," and his photo appeared in *The New York Times*. "The judges said I had a lot of integrity," the boy told reporters. He added that part of his motive was, "I didn't want to feel like a slime."[12]

When I read that quote from the spelling bee hero, I wondered what Kant would think. Not wanting to feel like a slime is an inclination, of course. So, if that was the boy's motive for telling the truth, it would seem to undermine the moral worth of his act. But this seems too harsh. It would mean that only unfeeling people could ever perform morally worthy acts. I don't think this is what Kant means.

If the only reason the boy told the truth was to avoid feeling guilty, or to avoid bad publicity should his error be discovered, then his truth-telling would lack moral worth. But if he told the truth because he knew it was the right thing to do, his act has moral worth regardless of the pleasure or satisfaction that might attend it. As long as he did the right thing for the right reason, feeling good about it doesn't undermine its moral worth.

The same is true of Kant's altruist. If he comes to the aid of other people simply for the pleasure it gives him, then his action lacks moral worth. But if he recognizes a duty to help one's fellow human beings and acts out of that duty, then the pleasure he derives from it is not morally disqualifying.

In practice, of course, duty and inclination often coexist. It is often hard to sort out one's own motives, let alone know for sure the motives of other people. Kant doesn't deny this. Nor does he think that only a hardhearted misanthrope can perform morally worthy acts. The point of his misanthrope example is to isolate the motive of duty—to see it unclouded by sympathy or compassion. And once we glimpse the motive of duty, we can identify the feature of our good deeds that gives them their moral worth—namely, their principle, not their consequences.

What Is the Supreme Principle of Morality?

If morality means acting from duty, it remains to be shown what duty requires. To know this, for Kant, is to know the supreme principle of morality. What is the supreme principle of morality? Kant's aim in the *Groundwork* is to answer this question.

We can approach Kant's answer by seeing how he connects three big ideas: morality, freedom, and reason. He explains these ideas through a series of contrasts or dualisms. They involve a bit of jargon, but if you notice the parallel among these contrasting terms, you are

well on your way to understanding Kant's moral philosophy. Here are the contrasts to keep in mind:

Contrast 1 (morality):	**duty v. inclination**
Contrast 2 (freedom):	**autonomy v. heteronomy**
Contrast 3 (reason):	**categorical v. hypothetical imperatives**

We've already explored the first of these contrasts, between duty and inclination. Only the motive of duty can confer moral worth on an action. Let me see if I can explain the other two.

The second contrast describes two different ways that my will can be determined—autonomously and heteronomously. According to Kant, I'm free only when my will is determined autonomously, governed by a law I give myself. Again, we often think of freedom as being able to do what we want, to pursue our desires unimpeded. But Kant poses a powerful challenge to this way of thinking about freedom: If you didn't choose those desires freely in the first place, how can you think of yourself as free when you're pursuing them? Kant captures this challenge in this contrast between autonomy and heteronomy.

When my will is determined heteronomously, it is determined externally, from outside of me. But this raises a difficult question: If freedom means something more than following my desires and inclinations, how is it possible? Isn't everything I do motivated by some desire or inclination determined by outside influences?

The answer is far from obvious. Kant observes that "everything in nature works in accordance with laws," such as the laws of natural necessity, the laws of physics, the laws of cause and effect.[13] This includes us. We are, after all, natural beings. Human beings are not exempt from the laws of nature.

But if we are capable of freedom, we must be capable of acting according to some other kind of law, a law other than the laws of physics. Kant argues that all action is governed by laws of some kind or other.

And if our actions were governed solely by the laws of physics, then we would be no different from that billiard ball. So if we're capable of freedom, we must be capable of acting not according to a law that is given or imposed on us, but according to a law we give ourselves. But where could such a law come from?

Kant's answer: from reason. We're not only sentient beings, governed by the pleasure and pain delivered by our senses; we are also rational beings, capable of reason. If reason determines my will, then the will becomes the power to choose independent of the dictates of nature or inclination. (Notice that Kant isn't asserting that reason always does govern my will; he's only saying that, insofar as I'm capable of acting freely, according to a law I give myself, then it must be the case that reason can govern my will.)

Of course, Kant isn't the first philosopher to suggest that human beings are capable of reason. But his idea of reason, like his conceptions of freedom and morality, is especially demanding. For the empiricist philosophers, including the utilitarians, reason is wholly instrumental. It enables us to identify means for the pursuit of certain ends—ends that reason itself does not provide. Thomas Hobbes called reason the "scout for the desires." David Hume called reason the "slave of the passions."

The utilitarians viewed human beings as capable of reason, but only instrumental reason. Reason's work, for the utilitarians, is not to determine what ends are worth pursuing. Its job is to figure out how to maximize utility by satisfying the desires we happen to have.

Kant rejects this subordinate role for reason. For him, reason is not just the slave of the passions. If that were all reason amounted to, Kant says, we'd be better off with instinct.[14]

Kant's idea of reason—of practical reason, the kind involved in morality—is not instrumental reason but "pure practical reason, which legislates a priori, regardless of all empirical ends."[15]

Categorical Versus Hypothetical Imperatives

But how can reason do this? Kant distinguishes two ways that reason can command the will, two different kinds of imperative. One kind of imperative, perhaps the most familiar kind, is a hypothetical imperative. Hypothetical imperatives use instrumental reason: If you want X, then do Y. If you want a good business reputation, then treat your customers honestly.

Kant contrasts hypothetical imperatives, which are always conditional, with a kind of imperative that is unconditional: a categorical imperative. "If the action would be good solely as a means to something else," Kant writes, "the imperative is hypothetical. If the action is represented as good in itself, and therefore as necessary for a will which of itself accords with reason, then the imperative is categorical."[16] The term *categorical* may seem like jargon, but it's not that distant from our ordinary use of the term. By "categorical," Kant means unconditional. So, for example, when a politician issues a categorical denial of an alleged scandal, the denial is not merely emphatic; it's unconditional—without any loophole or exception. Similarly, a categorical duty or categorical right is one that applies regardless of the circumstances.

For Kant, a categorical imperative commands, well, categorically—without reference to or dependence on any further purpose. "It is concerned not with the matter of the action and its presumed results, but with its form, and with the principle from which it follows. And what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may." Only a categorical imperative, Kant argues, can qualify as an imperative of morality.[17]

The connection among the three parallel contrasts now comes into view. To be free in the sense of autonomous requires that I act not out of a hypothetical imperative but out of a categorical imperative.

This leaves one big question: What *is* the categorical imperative, and what does it command of us? Kant says we can answer this question

from the idea of "a practical law that by itself commands absolutely and without any further motives."[18] We can answer this question from the idea of a law that binds us as rational beings regardless of our particular ends. So what is it?

Kant offers several versions or formulations of the categorical imperative, which he believes all amount to the same thing.

Categorical imperative I: Universalize your maxim

The first version Kant calls the formula of the universal law: "Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[19] By "maxim," Kant means a rule or principle that gives the reason for your action. He is saying, in effect, that we should act only on principles that we could universalize without contradiction. To see what Kant means by this admittedly abstract test, let's consider a concrete moral question: Is it ever right to make a promise you know you won't be able to keep?

Suppose I am in desperate need of money and so ask you for a loan. I know perfectly well that I won't be able to pay it back anytime soon. Would it be morally permissible to get the loan by making a false promise to repay the money promptly, a promise I know I can't keep? Would a false promise be consistent with the categorical imperative? Kant says no, obviously not. The way I can see that the false promise is at odds with the categorical imperative is by trying to universalize the maxim upon which I'm about to act.[20]

What is the maxim in this case? Something like this: "Whenever someone needs money badly, he should ask for a loan and promise to repay, even though he knows he won't be able to do so." If you tried to universalize this maxim and at the same time to act on it, Kant says, you would discover a contradiction: If everybody made false promises when they needed money, nobody would believe such promises. In fact, there would be no such thing as promises; universalizing the false promise would undermine the institution of promise-keeping. But

then it would be futile, even irrational, for you to try to get money by promising. This shows that making a false promise is morally wrong, at odds with the categorical imperative.

Some people find this version of Kant's categorical imperative unpersuasive. The formula of the universal law bears a certain resemblance to the moral bromide grown-ups use to chastise children who cut in line or speak out of turn: "What if everybody did that?" If everyone lied, then no one could rely on anybody's word, and we'd all be worse off. If this is what Kant is saying, he is making a consequentialist argument after all—rejecting the false promise not in principle, but for its possibly harmful effects or consequences.

No less a thinker than John Stuart Mill leveled this criticism against Kant. But Mill misunderstood Kant's point. For Kant, seeing whether I could universalize the maxim of my action and continue acting on it is not a way of speculating about possible consequences. It is a test to see whether my maxim accords with the categorical imperative. A false promise is not morally wrong because, writ large, it would undermine social trust (though it might well do so). It is wrong because, in making it, I privilege my needs and desires (in this case, for money) over everybody else's. The universalizing test points to a powerful moral claim: it's a way of checking to see if the action I am about to undertake puts my interests and special circumstances ahead of everyone else's.

Categorical imperative II: Treat persons as ends

The moral force of the categorical imperative becomes clearer in Kant's second formulation of it, the formula of humanity as an end. Kant introduces the second version of the categorical imperative as follows: We can't base the moral law on any particular interests, purposes, or ends, because then it would be only relative to the person whose ends they were. "But suppose there were something whose existence has in itself an absolute value," as an end in itself. "Then in it, and in it alone, would there be the ground of a possible categorical imperative."[21]

What could possibly have an absolute value, as an end in itself? Kant's answer: humanity. "I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will."[22] This is the fundamental difference, Kant reminds us, between persons and things. Persons are rational beings. They don't just have a relative value, but if anything has, they have an absolute value, an intrinsic value. That is, rational beings have dignity.

This line of reasoning leads Kant to the second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."[23] This is the formula of humanity as an end.

Consider again the false promise. The second formulation of the categorical imperative helps us see, from a slightly different angle, why it's wrong. When I promise to repay you the money I hope to borrow, knowing that I won't be able to, I'm manipulating you. I'm using you as a means to my financial solvency, not treating you as an end, worthy of respect.

Now consider the case of suicide. What's interesting to notice is that both murder and suicide are at odds with the categorical imperative, and for the same reason. We often think of murder and suicide as radically different acts, morally speaking. Killing someone else deprives him of his life against his will, while suicide is the choice of the person who commits it. But Kant's notion of treating humanity as an end puts murder and suicide on the same footing. If I commit murder, I take someone's life for the sake of some interest of my own—robbing a bank, or consolidating my political power, or giving vent to my anger. I use the victim as a means, and fail to respect his or her humanity as an end. This is why murder violates the categorical imperative.

For Kant, suicide violates the categorical imperative in the same way. If I end my life to escape a painful condition, I use myself as a means for the relief of my own suffering. But as Kant reminds us, a person is not a thing, "not something to be used merely as a means." I have no more right to dispose of humanity in my own person than in

someone else. For Kant, suicide is wrong for the same reason that murder is wrong. Both treat persons as things, and fail to respect humanity as an end in itself.[24]

The suicide example brings out a distinctive feature of what Kant considers the duty to respect our fellow human beings. For Kant, self-respect and respect for other persons flow from one and the same principle. The duty of respect is a duty we owe to persons as rational beings, as bearers of humanity. It has nothing to do with who in particular the person may be.

There is a difference between respect and other forms of human attachment. Love, sympathy, solidarity, and fellow feeling are moral sentiments that draw us closer to some people than to others. But the reason we must respect the dignity of persons has nothing to do with anything particular about them. Kantian respect is unlike love. It's unlike sympathy. It's unlike solidarity or fellow feeling. These reasons for caring about other people have to do with who they are in particular. We love our spouses and the members of our family. We feel sympathy for people with whom we can identify. We feel solidarity with our friends and comrades.

But Kantian respect is respect for humanity as such, for a rational capacity that resides, undifferentiated, in all of us. This explains why violating it in my own case is as objectionable as violating it in the case of someone else. It also explains why the Kantian principle of respect lends itself to doctrines of universal human rights. For Kant, justice requires us to uphold the human rights of all persons, regardless of where they live or how well we know them, simply because they are human beings, capable of reason, and therefore worthy of respect.

Morality and Freedom

We can now see the link, as Kant conceives it, between morality and freedom. Acting morally means acting out of duty—for the sake of the moral law. The moral law consists of a categorical imperative, a prin-

ciple that requires us to treat persons with respect, as ends in themselves. Only when I act in accordance with the categorical imperative am I acting freely. For whenever I act according to a hypothetical imperative, I act for the sake of some interest or end given outside of me. But in that case, I'm not really free; my will is determined not by me, but by outside forces—by the necessities of my circumstance or by the wants and desires I happen to have.

I can escape the dictates of nature and circumstance only by acting autonomously, according to a law I give myself. Such a law must be unconditioned by my particular wants and desires. So Kant's demanding notions of freedom and morality are connected. Acting freely, that is, autonomously, and acting morally, according to the categorical imperative, are one and the same.

This way of thinking about morality and freedom leads Kant to his devastating critique of utilitarianism. The effort to base morality on some particular interest or desire (such as happiness or utility) was bound to fail. "For what they discovered was never duty, but only the necessity of acting from a certain interest." But any principle based on interest "was bound to be always a conditioned one and could not possibly serve as a moral law."[25]

Questions for Kant

Kant's moral philosophy is powerful and compelling. But it can be difficult to grasp, especially at first. If you have followed along so far, several questions may have occurred to you. Here are four especially important ones.

QUESTION 1: *Kant's categorical imperative tells us to treat everyone with respect, as an end in itself. Isn't this pretty much the same as the Golden Rule? ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.")*

ANSWER: No. The Golden Rule depends on contingent facts about how people would like to be treated. The categorical imperative

requires that we abstract from such contingencies and respect persons as rational beings, regardless of what they might want in a particular situation.

Suppose you learn that your brother has died in a car accident. Your elderly mother, in frail condition in a nursing home, asks for news of him. You are torn between telling her the truth and sparing her the shock and agony of it. What is the right thing to do? The Golden Rule would ask, "How would you like to be treated in a similar circumstance?" The answer, of course, is highly contingent. Some people would rather be spared harsh truths at vulnerable moments, while others want the truth, however painful. You might well conclude that, if you found yourself in your mother's condition, you would rather not be told.

For Kant, however, this is the wrong question to ask. What matters is not how you (or your mother) would feel under these circumstances, but what it means to treat persons as rational beings, worthy of respect. Here is a case where compassion might point one way and Kantian respect another. From the standpoint of the categorical imperative, lying to your mother out of concern for her feelings would arguably use her as a means to her own contentment rather than respect her as a rational being.

QUESTION 2: *Kant seems to suggest that answering to duty and acting autonomously are one and the same. But how can this be? Acting according to duty means having to obey a law. How can subservience to a law be compatible with freedom?*

ANSWER: Duty and autonomy go together only in a special case—when I am the author of the law I have a duty to obey. My dignity as a free person does not consist in being subject to the moral law, but in being the author of "this very same law . . . and subordinated to it only on this ground." When we abide by the categorical imperative, we abide by a law we have chosen. "The dignity of man consists precisely in his capacity to make universal law,

although only on condition of being himself also subject to the law he makes."[26]

QUESTION 3: *If autonomy means acting according to a law I give myself, what guarantees that everyone will choose the same moral law? If the categorical imperative is the product of my will, isn't it likely that different people will come up with different categorical imperatives? Kant seems to think that we will all agree on the same moral law. But how can he be sure that different people won't reason differently, and arrive at various moral laws?*

ANSWER: When we will the moral law, we don't choose as you and me, particular persons that we are, but as rational beings, as participants in what Kant calls "pure practical reason." So it's a mistake to think that the moral law is up to us as individuals. Of course, if we reason from our particular interests, desires, and ends, we may be led to any number of principles. But these are not moral principles, only prudential ones. Insofar as we exercise pure practical reason, we abstract from our particular interests. This means that everyone who exercises pure practical reason will reach the same conclusion—will arrive at a single (universal) categorical imperative. "Thus a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same."[27]

QUESTION 4: *Kant argues that if morality is more than a matter of prudential calculation, it must take the form of a categorical imperative. But how can we know that morality exists apart from the play of power and interests? Can we ever be sure that we are capable of acting autonomously, with a free will? What if scientists discover (through brain-imaging, for example, or cognitive neuroscience) that we have no free will after all: Would that disprove Kant's moral philosophy?*

ANSWER: Freedom of the will is not the kind of thing that science can prove or disprove. Neither is morality. It's true that human beings inhabit the realm of nature. Everything we do can be described from a physical or biological point of view. When I raise my hand to cast a vote, my action can be explained in terms of muscles, neurons, synapses, and cells. But it can also be explained in terms of

ideas and beliefs. Kant says we can't help but understand ourselves from both standpoints—the empirical realm of physics and biology, and an "intelligible" realm of free human agency.

To answer this question more fully, I need to say a bit more about these two standpoints. They are two perspectives we can take on human agency, and on the laws that govern our actions. Here is how Kant describes the two standpoints:

> A rational being . . . has two points of view from which he can regard himself and from which he can know laws governing . . . all his actions. He can consider himself *first*—so far as he belongs to the sensible world—to be under laws of nature (heteronomy); and *secondly*—so far as he belongs to the intelligible world—to be under laws which, being independent of nature, are not empirical but have their ground in reason alone."[28]

The contrast between these two perspectives lines up with the three contrasts we have already discussed:

Contrast 1 (morality):	**duty v. inclination**
Contrast 2 (freedom):	**autonomy v. heteronomy**
Contrast 3 (reason):	**categorical v. hypothetical imperatives**
Contrast 4 (standpoints):	**intelligible v. sensible realms**

As a natural being, I belong to the sensible world. My actions are determined by the laws of nature and the regularities of cause and effect. This is the aspect of human action that physics, biology, and neuroscience can describe. As a rational being, I inhabit an intelligible world. Here, being independent of the laws of nature, I am capable of autonomy, capable of acting according to a law I give myself.

Kant argues that only from this second (intelligible) standpoint can I regard myself as free, "for to be independent of determination by

causes in the sensible world (and this is what reason must always attribute to itself) is to be free."[29]

If I were only an empirical being, I would not be capable of freedom; every exercise of will would be conditioned by some interest or desire. All choice would be heteronomous choice, governed by the pursuit of some end. My will could never be a first cause, only the effect of some prior cause, the instrument of one or another impulse or inclination.

Insofar as we think of ourselves as free, we cannot think of ourselves as merely empirical beings. "When we think of ourselves as free, we transfer ourselves into the intelligible world as members and recognize the autonomy of the will together with its consequence—morality."[30]

So—to return to the question—how are categorical imperatives possible? Only because "the idea of freedom makes me a member of the intelligible world."[31] The idea that we can act freely, take moral responsibility for our actions, and hold other people morally responsible for their actions requires that we see ourselves from this perspective—from the standpoint of an agent, not merely an object. If you really want to resist this notion, and claim that human freedom and moral responsibility are utter illusions, then Kant's account can't prove you wrong. But it would be difficult if not impossible to understand ourselves, to make sense of our lives, without some conception of freedom and morality. And any such conception, Kant thinks, commits us to the two standpoints—the standpoints of the agent and of the object. And once you see the force of this picture, you will see why science can never prove or disprove the possibility of freedom.

Remember, Kant admits that we aren't only rational beings. We don't only inhabit the intelligible world. If we were only rational beings, not subject to the laws and necessities of nature, then all of our actions "would invariably accord with the autonomy of the will."[32] Because we inhabit, simultaneously, both standpoints—the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom—there is always potentially a gap

between what we do and what we ought to do, between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

Another way of putting this point is to say that morality is not empirical. It stands at a certain distance from the world. It passes judgment on the world. Science can't, for all its power and insight, reach moral questions, because it operates within the sensible realm.

"To argue freedom away," Kant writes, "is as impossible for the most abstruse philosophy as it is for the most ordinary human reason."[33] It's also impossible, Kant might have added, for cognitive neuroscience, however sophisticated. Science can investigate nature and inquire into the empirical world, but it cannot answer moral questions or disprove free will. That is because morality and freedom are not empirical concepts. We can't prove that they exist, but neither can we make sense of our moral lives without presupposing them.

Sex, Lies, and Politics

One way of exploring Kant's moral philosophy is to see how he applied it to some concrete questions. I would like to consider three applications—sex, lies, and politics. Philosophers are not always the best authorities on how to apply their theories in practice. But Kant's applications are interesting in their own right and also shed some light on his philosophy as a whole.

Kant's case against casual sex

Kant's views on sexual morality are traditional and conservative. He opposes every conceivable sexual practice except sexual intercourse between husband and wife. Whether all of Kant's views on sex actually follow from his moral philosophy is less important than the underlying idea they reflect—that we do not own ourselves and are not at our own disposal. He objects to casual sex (by which he means sex outside of marriage), however consensual, on the grounds that it is degrading

and objectifying to both partners. Casual sex is objectionable, he thinks, because it is all about the satisfaction of sexual desire, not about respect for the humanity of one's partner.

> The desire which a man has for a woman is not directed toward her because she is a human being, but because she is a woman; that she is a human being is of no concern to the man; only her sex is the object of his desires.[34]

Even when casual sex involves the mutual satisfaction of the partners, "each of them dishonours the human nature of the other. They make of humanity an instrument for the satisfaction of their lusts and inclinations."[35] (For reasons we'll come to in a moment, Kant thinks marriage elevates sex by taking it beyond physical gratification and connecting it with human dignity.)

Turning to the question of whether prostitution is moral or immoral, Kant asks under what conditions the use of our sexual faculties is in keeping with morality. His answer, in this as in other situations, is that we should not treat others—or ourselves—merely as objects. We are not at our own disposal. In stark contrast to libertarian notions of self-possession, Kant insists that we do not own ourselves. The moral requirement that we treat persons as ends rather than as mere means limits the way we may treat our bodies and ourselves. "Man cannot dispose over himself because he is not a thing; he is not his own property."[36]

In contemporary debates about sexual morality, those who invoke autonomy rights argue that individuals should be free to choose for themselves what use to make of their own bodies. But this isn't what Kant means by autonomy. Paradoxically, Kant's conception of autonomy imposes certain limits on the way we may treat ourselves. For, recall: To be autonomous is to be governed by a law I give myself—the categorical imperative. And the categorical imperative requires that I treat all persons (including myself) with respect—as an end, not

merely as a means. So, for Kant, acting autonomously requires that we treat ourselves with respect, and not objectify ourselves. We can't use our bodies any way we please.

Markets in kidneys were not prevalent in Kant's day, but the rich did buy teeth for implantation from the poor. (*Transplanting of Teeth*, a drawing by the eighteenth-century English caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson, shows a scene in a dentist's office in which a surgeon extracts teeth from a chimney sweep while wealthy women wait for their implants.) Kant considered this practice a violation of human dignity. A person "is not entitled to sell a limb, not even one of his teeth."[37] To do so is to treat oneself as an object, a mere means, an instrument of profit.

Kant found prostitution objectionable on the same grounds. "To allow one's person for profit to be used by another for the satisfaction of sexual desire, to make of oneself an object of demand, is to . . . make of oneself a thing on which another satisfies his appetite, just as he satisfies his hunger upon a steak." Human beings are "not entitled to offer themselves, for profit, as things for the use of others in the satisfaction of their sexual propensities."To do so is to treat one's person as a mere thing, an object of use. "The underlying moral principle is that man is not his own property and cannot do with his body what he will."[38]

Kant's opposition to prostitution and casual sex brings out the contrast between autonomy as he conceives it—the free will of a rational being—and individual acts of consent. The moral law we arrive at through the exercise of our will requires that we treat humanity—in our own person and in others—never only as a means but as an end in itself. Although this moral requirement is based on autonomy, it rules out certain acts among consenting adults, namely those that are at odds with human dignity and self-respect.

Kant concludes that only sex within marriage can avoid "degrading humanity." Only when two persons give each other the whole of themselves, and not merely the use of their sexual capacities, can sex be other than objectifying. Only when both partners share with each other

their "person, body and soul, for good and ill and in every respect," can their sexuality lead to "a union of human beings."[39] Kant does not say that every marriage actually brings about a union of this kind. And he may be wrong to think that no such unions can ever occur outside of marriage, or that sexual relations outside of marriage involve nothing more than sexual gratification. But his views about sex highlight the difference between two ideas that are often confused in contemporary debate—between an ethic of unfettered consent and an ethic of respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons.

Is it wrong to lie to a murderer?

Kant takes a hard line against lying. In the *Groundwork*, it serves as a prime example of immoral behavior. But suppose a friend was hiding in your house, and a murderer came to the door looking for him. Wouldn't it be right to lie to the murderer? Kant says no. The duty to tell the truth holds regardless of the consequences.

Benjamin Constant, a French philosopher and contemporary of Kant, took issue with this uncompromising stance. The duty to tell the truth applies, Constant argued, only to those who deserve the truth, as surely the murderer does not. Kant replied that lying to the murderer is wrong, not because it harms him, but because it violates the principle of right: "Truthfulness in statements that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise therefrom for him or for any other."[40]

Admittedly, helping a murderer carry out his evil deed is a pretty heavy "disadvantage." But remember, for Kant, morality is not about consequences; it's about principle. You can't control the consequences of your action—in this case, telling the truth—since consequences are bound up with contingency. For all you know, your friend, fearing that the murderer is on his way, has already slipped out the back door. The reason you must tell the truth, Kant states, is not that the murderer is entitled to the truth, or that a lie would harm him. It's that a lie—any

lie—"vitiates the very source of right . . . To be truthful (honest) in all declarations is, therefore, a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits of no expediency whatsoever."[41]

This seems a strange and extreme position. Surely we don't have a moral duty to tell a Nazi storm trooper that Anne Frank and her family are hiding in the attic. It would seem that Kant's insistence on telling the truth to the murderer at the door either misapplies the categorical imperative or proves its folly.

Implausible though Kant's claim may seem, I would like to offer a certain defense of it. Although my defense differs from the one that Kant offers, it is nonetheless in the spirit of his philosophy, and, I hope, sheds some light on it.

Imagine yourself in the predicament with a friend hiding in the closet and the murderer at the door. Of course you don't want to help the murderer carry out his evil plan. That is a given. You don't want to say anything that will lead the murderer to your friend. The question is, what do you say? You have two choices. You could tell an outright lie: "No, she's not here." Or you could offer a true but misleading statement: "An hour ago, I saw her down the road, at the grocery store."

From Kant's point of view, the second strategy is morally permissible, but the first is not. You might consider this caviling. What, morally speaking, is the difference between a technically true but misleading statement and an outright lie? In both cases, you are hoping to mislead the murderer into believing that your friend is not hiding in the house.

Kant believes a great deal is at stake in the distinction. Consider "white lies," the small untruths we sometimes tell out of politeness, to avoid hurt feelings. Suppose a friend presents you with a gift. You open the box and find a hideous tie, something you would never wear. What do you say? You might say, "It's beautiful!" This would be a white lie. Or you might say, "You shouldn't have!" Or, "I've never seen a tie like this. Thank you." Like the white lie, these statements might give your friend the false impression that you like the tie. But they would nonetheless be true.

Kant would reject the white lie, because it makes an exception to the moral law on consequentialist grounds. Sparing someone's feelings is an admirable end, but it must be pursued in a way that is consistent with the categorical imperative, which requires that we be willing to universalize the principle on which we act. If we can carve out exceptions whenever we think our ends are sufficiently compelling, then the categorical character of the moral law unravels. The true but misleading statement, by contrast, does not threaten the categorical imperative in the same way. In fact, Kant once invoked this distinction when faced with a dilemma of his own.

Would Kant have defended Bill Clinton?

A few years before his exchange with Constant, Kant found himself in trouble with King Friedrich Wilhelm II. The king and his censors considered Kant's writings on religion disparaging to Christianity, and demanded that he pledge to refrain from any further pronouncements on the topic. Kant responded with a carefully worded statement: "As your Majesty's faithful subject, I shall in the future completely desist from all public lectures or papers concerning religion."[42]

Kant was aware, when he made his statement, that the king was not likely to live much longer. When the king died a few years later, Kant considered himself absolved of the promise, which bound him only "as your Majesty's faithful subject." Kant later explained that he had chosen his words "most carefully, so that I should not be deprived of my freedom . . . forever, but only so long as His Majesty was alive."[43] By this clever evasion, the paragon of Prussian probity succeeded in misleading the censors without lying to them.

Hairsplitting? Perhaps. But something of moral significance does seem to be at stake in the distinction between a bald-faced lie and an artful dodge. Consider former president Bill Clinton. No American public figure in recent memory chose his words or crafted his denials more carefully. When asked, during his first presidential campaign,

whether he had ever used recreational drugs, Clinton replied that he had never broken the antidrug laws of his country or state. He later conceded that he had tried marijuana while a student at Oxford in England.

His most memorable such denial came in response to reports that he had had sex in the White House with a twenty-two-year-old intern, Monica Lewinsky: "I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me . . . I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky."

It later came out that the president did have sexual encounters with Monica Lewinsky, and the scandal led to impeachment proceedings. During the impeachment hearings, a Republican congressman argued with a Clinton attorney, Gregory Craig, over whether the president's denial of "sexual relations" was a lie:

REP. BOB INGLIS (R-S.C.): Now, Mr. Craig, did he lie to the American people when he said, "I never had sex with that woman"? Did he lie?

CRAIG: He certainly misled and deceived—

INGLIS: Wait a minute, now. Did he lie?

CRAIG: To the American people—he misled them and did not tell them the truth at that moment.

INGLIS: OK, so you're not going to rely—and the President has personally insisted . . . that no legalities or technicalities should be allowed to obscure the simple moral truth. Did he lie to the American people when he said, "I never had sex with that woman"?

CRAIG: He doesn't believe he did and because of the way—let me explain that—explain, Congressman.

INGLIS: He doesn't believe that he lied?

CRAIG: No, he does not believe that he lied, because his notion of what sex is, is what the dictionary definition is. It is in fact something you may not agree with, but in his own mind, his definition was not—

INGLIS: OK, I understand that argument.

CRAIG: OK.

INGLIS: This is an amazing thing, that you now sit before us and you're taking back all of his—all of his apologies.

CRAIG: No.

INGLIS: You're taking them all back, aren't you?

CRAIG: No, I'm not.

INGLIS: Because now you're back to the argument—there are many arguments you can make here. One of them is he didn't have sex with her. It was oral sex, it wasn't real sex. Now is that what you're here to say to us today, that he did not have sex with Monica Lewinsky?

CRAIG: What he said was, to the American people, that he did not have sexual relations. And I understand you're not going to like this, Congressman, because it—you will see it as a technical defense or a hairsplitting, evasive answer. But sexual relations is defined in every dictionary in a certain way, and he did not have that kind of sexual contact with Monica Lewinsky . . . So, did he deceive the American people? Yes. Was it wrong? Yes. Was it blameworthy? Yes.[44]

The president's attorney conceded, as Clinton had already done, that the relationship with the intern was wrong, inappropriate, and blameworthy, and that the president's statements about it "misled and deceived" the public. The only thing he refused to concede was that the president had lied.

What was at stake in that refusal? The explanation can't simply be the legalistic one that lying under oath, in a deposition or in court, is a basis for perjury charges. The statement at issue was not made under oath, but in a televised statement to the American public. And yet both the Republican inquisitor and the Clinton defender believed that something important was at stake in establishing whether Clinton had lied or merely misled and deceived. Their spirited colloquy over the *L* word—"Did he lie?"—supports the Kantian thought that there is a morally relevant difference between a lie and a misleading truth.

But what could that difference be? The intention is arguably the same in both cases. Whether I lie to the murderer at the door or offer him a clever evasion, my intention is to mislead him into thinking that my friend is not hiding in my house. And on Kant's moral theory, it's the intention, or motive, that matters.

The difference, I think, is this: A carefully crafted evasion pays homage to the duty of truth-telling in a way that an outright lie does not. Anyone who goes to the bother of concocting a misleading but technically true statement when a simple lie would do expresses, however obliquely, respect for the moral law.

A misleading truth includes two motives, not one. If I simply lie to the murderer, I act out of one motive—to protect my friend from harm. If I tell the murderer that I recently saw my friend at the grocery store, I act out of two motives—to protect my friend and at the same time to uphold the duty to tell the truth. In both cases, I am pursuing an admirable goal, that of protecting my friend. But only in the second case do I pursue this goal in a way that accords with the motive of duty.

Some might object that, like a lie, a technically true but misleading statement could not be universalized without contradiction. But consider the difference: If everyone lied when faced with a murderer at the door or an embarrassing sex scandal, then no one would believe such statements, and they wouldn't work. The same cannot be said of misleading truths. If everyone who found himself in a dangerous or embarrassing situation resorted to carefully crafted evasions, people would not necessarily cease to believe them. Instead, people would learn to listen like lawyers and parse such statements with an eye to their literal meaning. This is exactly what happened when the press and the public became familiar with Clinton's carefully worded denials.

Kant's point is not that this state of affairs, in which people parse politicians' denials for their literal meaning, is somehow better than one in which nobody believes politicians at all. That would be a consequentialist argument. Kant's point is rather that a misleading statement that is nonetheless true does not coerce or manipulate the listener in

the same way as an outright lie. It's always possible that a careful listener could figure it out.

So there is reason to conclude that, on Kant's moral theory, true but misleading statements—to a murderer at the door, the Prussian censors, or the special prosecutor—are morally permissible in a way that bald-faced lies are not. You may think that I've worked too hard to save Kant from an implausible position. Kant's claim that it's wrong to lie to the murderer at the door may not ultimately be defensible. But the distinction between an outright lie and a misleading truth helps illustrate Kant's moral theory. And it brings out a surprising similarity between Bill Clinton and the austere moralist from Konigsberg.

Kant and justice

Unlike Aristotle, Bentham, and Mill, Kant wrote no major work of political theory, only some essays. And yet, the account of morality and freedom that emerges from his ethical writings carries powerful implications for justice. Although Kant does not work out the implications in detail, the political theory he favors rejects utilitarianism in favor of a theory of justice based on a social contract.

First, Kant rejects utilitarianism, not only as a basis for personal morality but also as a basis for law. As he sees it, a just constitution aims at harmonizing each individual's freedom with that of everyone else. It has nothing to do with maximizing utility, which "must on no account interfere" with the determination of basic rights. Since people "have different views on the empirical end of happiness and what it consists of," utility can't be the basis of justice and rights. Why not? Because resting rights on utility would require the society to affirm or endorse one conception of happiness over others. To base the constitution on one particular conception of happiness (such as that of the majority) would impose on some the values of others; it would fail to respect the right of each person to pursue his or her own ends. "No one can compel me to be happy in accordance with his conception of the welfare of

others," Kant writes, "for each may seek his happiness in whatever way he sees fit, so long as he does not infringe upon the freedom of others" to do the same.[45]

A second distinctive feature of Kant's political theory is that it derives justice and rights from a social contract—but a social contract with a puzzling twist. Earlier contract thinkers, including Locke, argued that legitimate government arises from a social contract among men and women who, at one time or another, decide among themselves on the principles that will govern their collective life. Kant sees the contract differently. Although legitimate government must be based on an original contract, "we need by no means assume that this contract . . . actually exists as a *fact*, for it cannot possibly be so." Kant maintains that the original contract is not actual but imaginary.[46]

Why derive a just constitution from an imaginary contract rather than a real one? One reason is practical: It's often hard to prove historically, in the distant history of nations, that any social contract ever took place. A second reason is philosophical: Moral principles can't be derived from empirical facts alone. Just as the moral law can't rest on the interests or desires of individuals, principles of justice can't rest on the interests or desires of a community. The mere fact that a group of people in the past agreed to a constitution is not enough to make that constitution just.

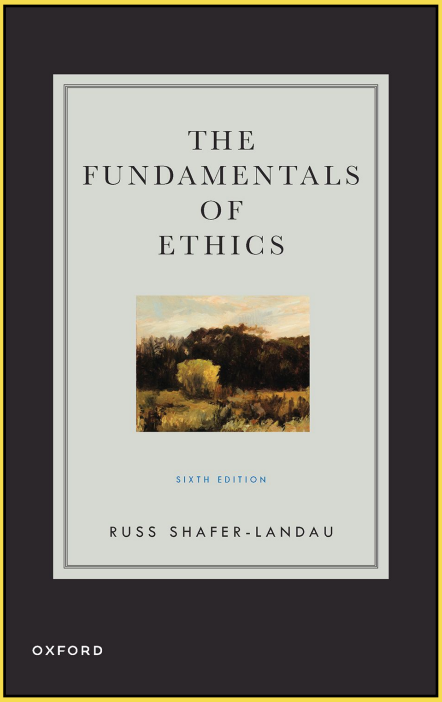
What kind of imaginary contract could possibly avoid this problem? Kant simply calls it "an *idea* of reason, which nonetheless has undoubted practical reality; for it can oblige every legislator to frame his laws in such a way that they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation," and obligate each citizen "as if he had consented." Kant concludes that this imaginary act of collective consent "is the test of the rightfulness of every public law."[47]

Kant didn't tell us what this imaginary contract would look like or what principles of justice it would produce. Almost two centuries later, an American political philosopher, John Rawls, would try to answer these questions.

PRE-READING

Virtue Ethics

Excerpted from **Russ Shafer-Landau**, *The Fundamentals of Ethics (Sixth Edition)*



CHAPTER 17

Virtue Ethics

What sort of person should I be? An answer to that question provides some of the most vital information you can ever have. And yet none of the ethical theories we have examined thus far does much to address it. ~~Each will say: You ought to be the sort of person who . . . maximizes happiness, or treats others with respect, or adheres to rules that free and equal people would endorse, or honors absolute rules. That's a pretty thin sort of answer.~~

To see what might be missing, consider what we might say of a police officer who obeys the law, but only reluctantly. He always does the minimum required of him. If he could get away with it, he would extort money from business owners on his beat, brutalize prisoners, and doctor evidence. He doesn't actually do any of these things. But that's only because he's afraid of what would happen if he were caught.

If we focus just on what the officer has or hasn't done, we will be missing a large part of the ethical picture. To fill things out, we must consider the kind of character he has. It's not a good one. We don't admire such a person; we don't want our children growing up like him. He is lazy, abusive, and untrustworthy, even if his conduct is satisfactory. If we think only about whether he has done his duty, there is nothing to criticize him for. But that just shows that we need to broaden our thinking. We should focus less on matters of moral duty, and concentrate much more on ideals of character. Following that advice leads us directly to a consideration of **virtue ethics**.

All of the moral theories we have reviewed thus far share a common assumption: that the moral philosopher's primary task is to define the nature of our moral duty. On this view, *What should I do?* is the crucial moral

question. Once we have an answer to that, I can know what sort of person I should be—namely, the sort who will do my duty as reliably as possible.

But what if we approached ethics from a different starting point? What if we began by considering what makes for a desirable human life, examining the conditions and the character traits needed to flourish? Rather than begin with a theory of moral duty, we would start with a picture of the good life and the good person, and define our duty by reference to these ideals. That is precisely what virtue ethics recommends.[1]

Virtue ethics is not a single theory, but rather a family of theories that can trace its history (in the West) to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, written about 2,400 years ago, has had the greatest influence in this tradition and remains a primary inspiration for most who work in it. ~~Aristotle's book develops most of the major themes that even today define the virtue ethical approach to the moral life. Let's consider some of the most important of these themes.~~

The Standard of Right Action

Virtue ethics insists that we understand right action by reference to what a virtuous person would characteristically do. ~~To put it a bit more formally:~~

> ~~(VE) An act is morally right just because it is one that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in that situation.~~

~~According to virtue ethicists, actions aren't right because of their results, or because they follow from some hard-and-fast rule. Rather, they are right because they would be done by someone of true virtue. This person is a **moral exemplar**—someone who sets a fine example and serves as a role model for the rest of us.~~ The ideal of the wholly virtuous person provides the goal that we ought to aim for, even if, in reality, each of us will fall short of it in one way or another.

Virtue ethics is actually a form of ethical pluralism. Though there is a single ultimate standard—do what the virtuous person would do—there are many cases where this advice is too general to be of use. At such times we need a set of more specific moral rules. Virtue ethics can provide

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1. Actually, there is a strand of virtue ethics that abandons talk of moral duties and moral requirements altogether, and instead suggests that we restrict our assessments to what is good and bad, virtuous and vicious. I invite you to reflect on whether it would be a gain or a loss to give up on the concepts of moral duty and requirement, but for the remainder of the chapter, I will assume that virtue ethicists allow a place for these notions.

these, too. For each virtue, there is a rule that tells us to act accordingly; for each vice, a rule that tells us to avoid it. So we will have a large set of moral rules—do what is honest; act loyally; display courage; deal justly with others; show wisdom; be temperate; avoid gluttony; refrain from infidelity; don't be timid, lazy, stingy, or careless; free yourself of prejudice; and so on.

When these rules conflict, how do we know what to do? We should follow the lead of the virtuous person. True, there will inevitably be disagreement about who counts as virtuous, and about the actions such a person would pursue. ~~But this needn't cripple us. There is lots of room for critical discussion about who is virtuous and why. In the end, we may have to agree to disagree, since there may be no way to convince someone whose moral outlook is fundamentally opposed to our own.~~ Those who have been raised to idolize Hitler or Stalin are going to have a skewed moral vision, and there may be no way to convince them of their error. Virtue ethicists deny that this undermines the existence of correct moral standards. It just shows that some people may always be blind to them.

Moral Complexity

Many moral philosophers have hoped to identify a simple rule, or a precise method, that could tell us exactly what our moral duty is in each situation.[2] What's more, this rule or method could be reliably used by anyone, so long as he or she is minimally intelligent. A classic example of this is the golden rule. Even a five-year-old can apply this test.

Virtue ethicists reject the idea that there is any simple formula for determining how to act. At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle cautions that we must not expect the same degree of precision in all areas of study, and implies that morality lacks rules and methods of thinking that are as precise as those, say, in mathematics. When it comes to morality, we must be content with general principles that allow for exceptions.

Virtue ethicists have followed Aristotle in this thought. To them, ethics is a complex, messy area of decision-making, one that requires emotional maturity and sound judgment. One of the *problems* of the golden

2. See the following discussions for more in-depth treatment of why people would have such hopes: on the structure of moral theories, pp. 16–17 of the Introduction; on proceduralism, chapter 13, pp. 194–195; on knowing one's duty, chapter 16, pp. 247–249.

rule, for instance, is that even a child can use it with authority. Aristotle thought it obvious that even the most perceptive children are far short of true moral wisdom.

Virtue ethicists sometimes invite us to appreciate the complexity of morality by having us imagine a moral rule book. The book would contain all the true rules of ethics, and all of the precise methods for applying them. It would state when exceptions were called for and when they were forbidden. It could be applied in a mechanical way, without any need of judgment.

Is this a real possibility? Not likely, according to virtue ethicists. Morality is not like geometry or civil engineering. We have moral rules of thumb that can help us in most situations. But strict obedience to such rules is bound to lead us into error. And the rules, of course, will sometimes conflict. What we need in all cases is a kind of sensitivity. It is something very different from a rote application of preset rules.

This does not mean that everything is up for grabs in ethics. The precision of a discipline is one thing; whether its principles, methods, and results are merely a matter of opinion—each one as good as the rest—is quite another. Morality may be an imprecise discipline, but that does not mean that each person's moral views are as plausible as another's. Aristotle and most of his followers believe in objective standards of morality (those that are true independently of personal feelings or opinions). ~~Whether they are right about this is something that we consider at great length in the final part of this book.~~

Moral Understanding

As virtue ethicists see things, moral understanding is not just a matter of knowing a bunch of moral facts. If it were, then a child prodigy might be one of the morally wisest among us. As we have seen, virtue ethicists deny this possibility. Imagine turning to such a child for advice about dealing with difficult coworkers, or helping a drug-addicted friend through recovery, or determining the best way to break off a relationship.

Moral understanding is a species of practical wisdom. Think of some familiar kinds of practical wisdom—knowing how to fix a car engine, how to skillfully play an instrument, or how to inspire teammates to come together behind an important project. Such knowledge does require an understanding of certain facts, but it is much more than that. We all know people with plenty of book smarts and very little in the way of good sense.

Moral wisdom is a kind of know-how that requires a lot of training and experience. What it doesn't require is a superior IQ or a vast reading list.

We need experience, emotional maturity, and a great deal of reflection and training in order to acquire moral wisdom. We have to know how to read people, to be familiar with the sorts of troubles people can fall into, to understand the kinds of personality issues that can prevent us from flourishing, to have a keen ability to pick up on social cues. We can't learn such things only from books.

One way to reinforce this idea is to appreciate the crucial roles that emotions play in moral understanding. There are three that are especially important.

1. *Emotions can help us to see what is morally relevant, by tipping us off to what matters in a given situation.* Fear can signal danger; guilt can reveal our moral faults; compassion can tell us that someone needs our help. It's no use knowing that you ought to aid those in need if you always walk around with blinders on, never aware of the struggles or potential discomfort of others. The person with the virtues of compassion, sympathy, and kindness will see things that others miss. Our emotions, when they are well trained, reliably alert us to the morally important features of our lives.

2. *Emotions can also help to tell us what is right and wrong.* If we are virtuous, the anxiety we feel when considering certain actions is excellent evidence that these actions are immoral. We often feel that certain paths are simply off limits, or that other things definitely must be done, before we have a good intellectual account of why this is so. That a good man feels proud of his actions is reason to think that he has done well. His anger is a reliable indicator that someone has done wrong.

3. *Emotions also help to motivate us to do the right thing.* They support and reinforce our thoughts about what we ought to do. Knowing the right course of action is one thing; following through is another. The morally wise person will have an easier time of things here, because her emotions will be in harmony with her understanding of what morality calls for. Unlike a weak-willed person or someone who manages to control her inappropriate impulses, the morally wise person wholeheartedly does what is right. She is relatively free of inner conflict and takes pleasure in doing the right thing.

Moral wisdom is an extremely complicated kind of skill. It does require knowledge of the way the world works, but it demands more than that. We must have a great deal of emotional intelligence as well. The moral virtues, which all require moral wisdom, therefore also require a

combination of intellectual and emotional maturity. A person with only a crude appreciation for life's complexities, or a blank emotional life, is bound to be morally blind. Virtue ethics perfectly explains why that is so.

Moral Education

Virtue ethicists, again following Aristotle, believe that moral understanding can be gained only through training, experience, and practice. ~~True, some people are by nature kinder or more generous than others. Yet an impulse in these directions is not enough. Without wisdom, these traits will only occasionally lead to appropriate action.~~ We shouldn't always give to others or tend to their needs. They may be engaged in evil projects. They may need tough love, rather than indulgence. The wise person will know when to give, and when to withhold.

So virtue is not inborn. It takes time to acquire. And it also takes the right sort of environment and teachers. Indeed, Aristotle thought that whether we are virtuous or not is partly a matter of moral luck.[3] Our upbringing plays a crucial role in whether we are able to become virtuous, and we obviously cannot control the environment we are raised in. If we are lucky, we will have wise and caring parents and teachers to guide us on the path of virtue. But many are not so fortunate. Those who grow up in a corrupt society with terrible role models may (through no fault of their own) lack the opportunity to develop virtues. ~~The most important elements of moral education occur in our youth—so much so that Aristotle doubted that a person raised in vice could later change his character very significantly.~~

The point of giving children a moral education is straightforward—to help them acquire the virtues. The key to this is to develop their capacity for moral wisdom. The virtue ethicist invites us to think of children as apprentices being taught to gain a very complex skill, that of moral wisdom.

Think first about how apprentices in other areas are trained. An apprentice in a professional kitchen begins with a list of dos and don'ts, a set of hard-and-fast rules. Over time, she learns the limits of these rules, when to honor and when to break them. There is no master rule book that can give her this knowledge. She acquires it through trial and error,

3. For more on moral luck, see chapter 12, pp. 188–189.

through the advice of experts, through a deeper understanding of cooking methods and of her ingredients. By the end of a successful education, she is something of an artist.

The same holds true of moral education. We begin as apprentices, following in an unquestioning way the rules handed down by our parents and teachers. In the early stages of their moral training, children learn simple rules, and are told to treat them as absolute: never, ever lie, steal, hit others, tattle, and so on. These rules are crude, but it's right to ask our children to obey them. We address our learners where they are.

As children mature, they will, through experience and guidance, come to appreciate when exceptions are called for. We gradually step back from the rules we learned on our mother's knee, and subject them to careful scrutiny. A successful education will produce an independent thinker, one who doesn't need the old, over-simple rules as a crutch to get through each new situation. We understand, for instance, that honesty is the best policy. But sometimes honesty would be so hurtful and gain so little that evasion is the right way to go. As a rule, friends deserve our loyalty. But that doesn't mean that we must cover up for them if they steal from their employer and ask us to lie about it.

This line of thought supports the virtue ethicist's rejection of a simple moral litmus test, a formula that could be used by anyone, no matter her degree of moral sophistication. Such a test not only overlooks the great complexity of morality, but also ignores the point that people possess moral wisdom in degrees. Advice that is suitable for a novice will be too crude for an expert, and vice versa.

The Nature of Virtue

The ultimate goal of a moral education is to make ourselves better people. A better person is a more virtuous person—someone who is more courageous, just, temperate, and wise (among other things).

A virtue is a character trait. It's not a mere habit, or a tendency to act in certain ways. ~~Habits don't define a person; character traits do. Some people are habitually loyal or generous. Yet they may lack virtue, because they don't really understand why it is appropriate to act this way. Virtues require wisdom about what is important, and why.~~ While habits are defined as certain patterns of behavior, virtues require much more. In addition to routinely acting well, the virtuous person also has a distinctive set of perceptions, thoughts, and motives.

Let's make this concrete. Consider first the virtue of generosity. A generous person will often have different *perceptions* from a stingy person. Generous people will see the homeless person on the street, will take note of the shy child in the classroom, will realize that an injured person is having trouble with the door. Stingy people tend to look the other way.

A generous person has different *thoughts* from those of an ungenerous person. A generous person will think about how to be helpful, will not think only of his own needs, will value being of service, and will believe in the goodness of caring for the less fortunate.

A generous person's *motives* will differ from those of a stingy person. Generous people are not begrudging of their time, they are moved by the distress of others, and they take pleasure in freely giving what they can to those in need.

We can offer similar accounts of all of the other virtues. Courage, for instance, requires that we correctly perceive various threats or dangers, control our fear in a reasonable way, be moved by a noble end, and act accordingly. ~~Though Aristotle considered courage primarily in the context of the battlefield, this virtue, like all virtues, has its place in any number of more ordinary situations. The new kid in school displays courage when taking an unpopular stand among those whose approval and companionship he hopes for. Gandhi displayed courage in peacefully resisting the nightsticks and attack dogs of the British colonial police. A whistle-blower is courageous in revealing the corruption of her employers, knowing that she may be fired or sued for telling the truth.~~

Virtuous people are therefore defined not just by their deeds, but also by their inner life. They see, believe, and feel things differently from vicious people. They see what's important, know what is right and why it is right, and want to do things because they are right.

People are virtuous only when their understanding and their emotions are well integrated. A virtuous person who understands the right thing to do will also be strongly motivated to do it, without regret or reluctance, for all the right reasons. In Aristotle's view, and in the virtue ethical tradition, this is what distinguishes the truly virtuous from the merely **continent**—those who can keep it together, manage to do the right thing, but with little or no pleasure, and only by suppressing very strong contrary desires. As Aristotle insists, "Virtuous conduct gives pleasure to the lover of virtue."[4] ~~This is one way to distinguish the truly virtuous from the merely continent.~~

4. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a12.

Virtue and the Good Life

Aristotle thought it obvious that all of us seek **eudaimonia**, which translates as "happiness," or "flourishing." A life of eudaimonia is an excellent life for the person living it. The happiness Aristotle speaks of is not mere enjoyment. It isn't only a state of mind, but rather a combination of activity and pleasure. Aristotle thought that the good life is an active one filled with wise choices and worthy pursuits. No matter how much pleasure you get from sitting in front of the TV and watching *The Simpsons* (a lot, in my case), a life devoted to that fails to qualify as a good life. Aristotle was no hedonist.

Aristotle argued that virtue is an essential element in a good life. In this he agreed with his teacher, Plato. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle did not think that we could be happy on the rack. Virtue does not guarantee a good life; it is necessary, but not sufficient, for our flourishing. Most contemporary virtue ethicists side with Aristotle on this one—enough misfortune can damage a life so greatly as to make it, on the whole, an unenviable one. If a virtuous person loses her beloved family to war or disease, or falls prey to nasty rumors, crushing debt, and crippling disability, then no matter how virtuous, she can fail to gain true happiness.

But is virtue really essential to a good life, however?[5] What about all of those criminals who get away with their crimes and enjoy a lavish retirement? ~~What of the powerful tyrant who dies at the end of a long reign, peacefully and in his sleep?~~ Few would argue that such people are virtuous. Yet they seem to live very good lives.

Virtue ethicists argue that appearances here are deceiving. Such people may indeed be pleased with how things are going, and get a lot of enjoyment from their lives. (Then again, a closer look at the criminal's fear and insecurity, his emotional immaturity and the complications this brings, may make us think twice.) But virtue ethicists deny that pleasure is the be-all and end-all of a good life. Pleasure without virtue is not worth much. The most pleasant life may be a poor one indeed.

~~How can such a view be defended? Aristotle set up a three-part test to determine our ultimate good, in part to show that pleasure, wealth, power, and fame are *not* what life is all about.~~

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5. For more on this topic, see chapter 8, pp. 107–110, and chapter 14, pp. 208–212, as well as the general discussion in part 1.

First off, our ultimate good must not be something that is only instrumentally valuable. This explains why money and fame are ruled out, since these things have no worth of their own. They are merely a means to gaining other things of value.

Our ultimate good must also be *self-sufficient*. Possessing it is, all by itself, enough to make a life a worthy one. Political power fails this test. Having power over others is not what makes life valuable. Power is important, when it is, just because of what it enables a leader to do.

Finally, our ultimate good must involve something that is *distinctive* about us, something that is uniquely human. We need food to survive. But being nourished cannot be our final good, since we share this need with plants and animals. And since animals can experience pleasure, the point of our lives cannot be to gain pleasure, either.

What sets us apart from everything else in the world is our rationality. Our ultimate good, then, must take the form of exercising our rationality. But there is little good in reasoning poorly. Rather, our ultimate good consists in the excellent use of our reasoning powers. And that is precisely what the virtues involve.

How attractive is a life of virtue? Very. Just think of what we hope and try for when raising our children. We want them to be kind, fair, generous, appropriately self-confident, and wise. We hope that they develop courage, that they know how to be a good friend, that they can sensitively offer comfort to others in need. Each of these is a virtue; a person who manages to have them all is in most ways living an excellent life. True, if Aristotle is correct, having these traits will not guarantee a good life. The admirable nature of a virtuous person may, for instance, attract the envy and hatred of others, who will sometimes make a martyr of a noble soul. But this should not lead us to think that the virtues are unnecessary for a good life. Even if a life of virtue is not a guarantee that you will flourish, a life without virtue is a poor one.

The virtue ethicist thus has an answer to a skeptic who charges the good person with being a dupe, with sacrificing self-interest on the altar of virtue. Being virtuous will (barring disaster) make you better off. It will ensure that you aim at things worth trying for. Virtuous people ordinarily do very well for themselves, even if the vicious sometimes have more fun. That is because human well-being is *defined* in terms of the virtues. Virtues are those excellences of character that contribute to one's well-being. Without them, one is leading the life of an animal—or worse.

Objections

The virtue ethical approach to life has a number of attractive features. I've tried to sketch some of the more important of them here. But given its unorthodox approach to morality, it is hardly surprising that virtue ethics has come in for its share of criticisms. Here are some of the more significant ones.

Tragic Dilemmas

Consider two central claims of the virtue ethical approach to morality:

1. Actions that would be done by a virtuous agent, acting in character, are morally right.
2. Such actions, when motivated by virtue, deserve our praise.

If these views are problematic, then virtue ethics is in deep trouble. Tragic dilemmas highlight the difficulty here.

A tragic dilemma is a situation in which a good person's life will be ruined, no matter what she does. All of her options will lead to disaster. Virtuous people will usually be able to avoid these situations, since they typically arise as a result of some serious moral mistake. Think, for instance, of the premise of so many movies—simple-minded guy finds bundle of cash, stupidly walks away with it rather than reporting it, and eventually faces a host of deadly choices.

But it is possible to find yourself in a tragic dilemma through no fault of your own. Consider the title character in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, who is detained in a concentration camp and then given the terrible news: one of her two children will be sent to the gas chamber. She must choose which one. If she refuses, both children will be killed.

Sophie's life will be ruined no matter what she does. But she should not withdraw from the situation; she must make a choice. A virtuous person (acting in character) would do so, since that would mean saving one of her precious children. If virtue ethics is correct, then selecting one of her children to be murdered is morally right and morally praiseworthy. But that seems wrong.

Here is an *Argument from Tragic Dilemmas* designed to set out the worry:

1. If virtue ethics is the correct account of morality, then Sophie's selection of one of her children to be murdered is morally right and morally praiseworthy.
2. It is neither.
3. Therefore, virtue ethics is not the correct account of morality.

Premise 1 assumes that a virtuous person would do as Sophie did—namely, select one of her children to die. Further, it assumes that there is a right way and a wrong way to do this. A virtuous person will see the tragedy for what it is, will not leap at the chance to make the selection, will not express joy at what is about to happen. And that was Sophie's response. She was motivated as a virtuous person would be motivated—with a recognition of the terrible burden she faced, with love for her children, and with the greatest possible regret.

The only way to challenge premise 1 is to deny that a virtuous person in Sophie's shoes would select one of her children to be killed. That *might* be right—a virtuous person might refuse to make a deal with evil, and so try to keep her hands clean by not playing along with the sadistic choice offered to her. But recall that this means the death of both of her children, and it is hard to think that a virtuous person would prefer that to the death of one. I might be wrong about this. If so, then we have a way of rejecting the first premise.

That said, I think that the better option for the virtue ethicist is to criticize premise 2. *Under the circumstances*, a virtuous person *would* try to minimize the number of innocent deaths. And that means having to make a tragic choice, rather than refusing to do so. Choosing is indeed the right thing to do—even if it is absolutely heartbreaking.

It may also be praiseworthy. We might say of a person who refused to make this choice that, however understandable it may be, she was still being squeamish, and showed a lack of nerve. Having to make such a choice under these circumstances requires courage and fortitude, which is praiseworthy. Sometimes life presents us only with a choice among evils. Finding the inner strength to choose the lesser evil on that occasion need not be a moral failing, but may instead be something quite admirable. Our admiration should only increase when the choice involves an outcome that predictably destroys all of one's hopes for happiness.

If this analysis is correct, then virtue ethicists have an adequate reply to the Argument from Tragic Dilemmas. They can argue that certain choices in these situations are virtuous and that such choices are therefore right and admirable, even if, in more ordinary circumstances, any such choice would be purely evil.

Does Virtue Ethics Offer Adequate Moral Guidance?

Critics of virtue ethics often accuse it of failing to provide enough help in solving moral puzzles. When we are trying to figure out how to behave,

we'd like to have something more than this advice: do what a virtuous person would do.

But virtue ethics *can* provide more advice. It will tell us to act according to a large number of moral rules, each based on doing what is virtuous or avoiding what is vicious: do what is temperate, loyal, modest, generous, compassionate, courageous, and so on. Avoid acting in a manner that is greedy, deceitful, malicious, unfair, short-tempered, and so on. The list of virtues and vices is a long one, and this may really be of some help in figuring out what to do.

Still, the virtue ethicist has to face the familiar problem of moral conflict. What happens when these virtue rules conflict with one another? Suppose, for instance, that you are on vacation and happen to see your best friend's husband intimately cozying up to another woman. Would a virtuous person reveal what she has seen? Well, there is a virtue of honesty, and that points to telling your friend. But being a busybody and rushing to judgment are vices; it's their marriage, not yours, and poking your nose into other people's business isn't a morally attractive thing to do.

~~That's all well and good. But you must do something.~~ How to resolve this conflict (and countless others)? There *is* a right answer here, because there is something that a virtuous person would do. But virtue ethicists have offered very little instruction for deciding what that is. Once you appreciate which virtues and vices are involved in the situation, it is up to you to sort out how to balance them against one another.

This, of course, will be deeply unsatisfying to many people. They want their ethical theory to provide a clear rule that can tell them exactly what is required for each new situation. With expectations set this high, virtue ethics is bound to disappoint.

Unsurprisingly, however, virtue ethicists think that such expectations are implausible and far too demanding. They deny that ethics is meant to provide us with a precise rule or mechanical decision procedure that can crank out the right answer for each morally complex case. ~~Recall the virtue ethicists' earlier criticisms of such an idea, and their claim that moral advice must be offered based on a person's level of wisdom and experience. There is no uniform moral guidebook, no formula or master rule that can tell us how to behave. We must figure it out for ourselves, through reflection, discussion, and experience.~~

Virtue ethicists can also argue that their theoretical competitors face similar problems. Most ethical theories incorporate a rule requiring promise keeping. But isn't it sometimes okay to break this rule? If so, is

there any *other* rule that could tell us precisely when we may break our promises? Try it out. "You are allowed to break a promise if and only if _____." I don't know how to fill in that blank. That of course doesn't show that it can't be done. But anyone who can do it will also be able to know, in difficult situations, how to balance the virtue of fidelity against other considerations.

The bottom line is that almost every moral theory will require us to exercise good judgment in applying its rules. Virtue ethics requires more of us in this regard than some other theories, but that is a drawback only if morality can be made more precise than virtue ethicists believe. Whether that is so remains to be seen.

Is Virtue Ethics Too Demanding?

Virtue ethics tells us to do what a virtuous person would do in our situation. But what if a truly virtuous person sets a standard of excellence that is (almost) impossible to reach?

In 1933, Mohandas Gandhi went on a hunger strike that nearly killed him. Others have protested injustice by fasting unto death. Some of these protests were not based on personal grievances, but were expressions of outrage at social injustice. ~~Assuming that some hunger strikers are virtuous people, acting in character, it appears that virtue ethics requires us to follow their lead.~~

Morality can sometimes require a great deal of us, but this may be going too far. One possibility, of course, is that it isn't. Perhaps we should be much readier than we are to give up our health or even our lives in political protest. Virtue ethicists could argue, as consequentialists have long done,[6] that morality really does demand much more of us than we think. ~~They might say that the expectations we've been raised with are too lax. If we were raised in a way that repeatedly reminded us of the importance of noble sacrifice, then we would be much more inclined to follow such examples. Our reluctance to sacrifice ourselves is no strike against virtue ethics, but rather against our own self-indulgence and desire for comfort and security.~~

Virtue ethicists could take a less severe stance, however, and argue that such extreme measures are appropriate only in rather special circumstances. ~~If Russ Shafer-Landau went on a hunger strike, few would pay any attention, and so my extended fast would likely do more harm than good.~~

6. See chapter 10, pp. 143–147, for more discussion of how demanding consequentialism can be.

The test of right action is to ask how a virtuous person, *in my circumstances*, would act. Since my circumstances are quite different from those of a world-renowned political leader, it doesn't follow that a hunger strike is something I should try myself.

That doesn't quite let me off the hook. For a truly virtuous person might do much more for others, and far less for himself, than I typically do in my everyday existence. ~~And were he in my shoes, this might *still* be the case.~~ So virtue ethics may indeed demand quite a lot from us.

Who Are the Moral Role Models?

If virtue ethics is correct, then we can solve moral puzzles only by knowing how a virtuous person would act in our situation. Yet who are the moral exemplars? How do we decide who our role models should be, especially if different people endorse different candidates?

This is a very hard problem. After all, we pick our role models in large part by seeing how well they live up to our preexisting beliefs about what is right and wrong. Some people exalt suicide bombers as role models; others get sick just knowing that's so.

~~One solution to this problem is relativism—the idea that appropriate role models will differ from person to person, or culture to culture. This leads to the view that moral standards, too, will differ in this way. Since we spend a good deal of time on relativism in chapter 19, I suggest we move on and consider some alternative solutions here.~~

~~People can be truly virtuous even if we don't realize that they are. When we fail to choose the right role models, this is often explained by our own failure of virtue. Winston Churchill, for instance, though possessed of a great many virtues himself, was nevertheless so committed to maintaining British rule over India that he never saw past his racist attitudes toward Indians. Churchill once announced, "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion." His racism prevented him from seeing Gandhi as a moral exemplar; indeed, Churchill was fully prepared to let Gandhi die in one of his hunger strikes. Churchill declared that Gandhi "ought to be lain bound hand and foot at the gates of Delhi and then trampled on by an enormous elephant with the new Viceroy [the British ruler of India] seated on its back."[7] Churchill's failure of virtue~~

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7. These quotes appear in Johann Hari, "The Two Churchills," *New York Times Book Review* (August 15, 2010), p. 11. Hari was reviewing Richard Toye's book *Churchill's Empire: The World that Made Him and the World He Made* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010).

clouded his judgment so badly that he regarded Gandhi as deserving to die because of his threat to British imperial ambitions.

We become more insightful in selecting moral exemplars only by becoming morally wiser in general. And as we have seen, there is no fixed recipe for doing this. Moral education is a lifelong affair, and we are never fully wise. So we may indeed be off target in selecting our role models.

This isn't the whole story, of course. The whole story would involve a much more detailed account of how we gain moral knowledge, including knowledge of how to correctly identify our role models and how to resolve disputes about this matter. But in this respect, the virtue ethicist is in the same boat as everyone else. *Every* moral theorist has to answer hard problems about how to gain moral wisdom, and how to resolve disagreements about fundamental moral issues.

Conflict and Contradiction

We have seen in previous chapters how certain kinds of moral conflict can yield contradiction.[8] Contradictions are a fatal flaw in any theory. Virtue ethics may be saddled with contradictions, and if that is so, then it is sunk.

The problem is simple. If there are many virtuous people, then what happens if they disagree about what to do in a given situation? If, in my shoes, some good people would act one way, and others would behave differently, then it seems that the same action would be both right (because some role models would do it) and not right (because others would not do it). This is a contradiction.

The very wise people I have known do not all think alike. They don't see every case in the same light. They temper justice with mercy to varying degrees. They disagree about the role and form that discipline should take in good parenting. Some are more optimistic than others; some are more willing to demand more personal sacrifice than others. It thus seems possible that virtuous role models, acting in character, would do different things in the same situation. And that would yield contradiction.

There are a few ways out of this problem.[9] The first is to insist that there is really only a single truly virtuous person, and so the differences

8. See especially chapter 15, pp. 230–231. This matter is also discussed at some length in chapter 19, pp. 300–305.

9. A similar problem confronts the social contract theory; see chapter 14, pp. 215–216.

that cause the contradictions would disappear. The second is to insist that every virtuous person, acting in character, would do exactly the same thing in every situation. I don't find either of these replies very plausible, but perhaps there is more to be said for them than I am imagining.

The better option, I think, is to slightly modify the virtue ethical view of right action, given earlier in this chapter (p. 257) by the thesis labeled (VE). Assuming that virtuous people, acting in character, will sometimes do different things in the same situation, we should say the following:

1. An act in a given situation is morally required just because *all* virtuous people, acting in character, would perform it.
2. An act in a given situation is morally permitted just because *some but not all* virtuous people, acting in character, would perform it.
3. An act in a given situation is morally forbidden just because *no* virtuous person would perform it.

This really will solve the contradiction problem. If different virtuous people would act differently in the same situation, then we are no longer forced to say that an act is both right and wrong. Rather, we say that it is simply permitted, neither required nor forbidden. If different virtuous people would act differently were they in our shoes, then we are permitted to act as any one of them does. In that case, the theory will not tell us which role model to follow—it will be, morally speaking, up to us.

The Priority Problem

How do we get a handle on the nature of virtue? Here is the standard way. We first get clear about our duty, and then define a virtue as a character trait that reliably moves us to do our duty for the right reasons. So, for instance, to understand the virtue of generosity, we first note that we are duty-bound to help the needy, and then define generosity as the character trait of giving to others in need, for the right reasons.

Virtue ethicists reject this strategy, because they deny that we can know our duty before knowing how virtuous people characteristically behave. For them, virtue has a kind of priority over duty—we must know what virtue is, and how the virtuous would behave, before knowing what we must do.

Virtue ethics is unique in this regard. All other moral theories think of duty as the primary moral concept. For them, we can understand virtue only after we have the concept of duty under our belt.

The issue is about which concept is morally fundamental—virtue, or right action. To help see the stakes here, consider this question: Are

people virtuous because they perform right actions, or are actions right because virtuous people perform them? Other moral theories go with the first option. Virtue ethics takes the second. And this raises a number of concerns.

~~Consider the evil of rape. The virtue ethicist explains its wrongness by claiming that virtuous people would never rape other people. But that seems backward. It is true, of course, that virtuous people are not rapists. But their rejection of rape is not what explains its wrongness. Rape is wrong because it expresses contempt for the victim, sends a false message of the rapist's superiority, violates the victim's rights, and imposes terrible harm without consent. We explain why virtuous people don't rape others by showing why rape is wrong. We don't explain why rape is wrong by showing that good people will not rape others.~~

~~The same goes for right actions.~~ A bystander who sees a toddler about to walk into traffic should rush over to prevent the accident. Why? Not because a virtuous person would do such a thing (though of course she would). The real reason is to save a child's life, or at least to prevent her from being seriously injured. It's not that intervention is right because virtuous people would do it; rather, they would do it because it is right.

~~If this has a familiar ring to it, that's because the structure of this theory closely mirrors that of Euthyphro's preferred view, the divine command theory (discussed in chapter 5). That theory denied that we could understand our duty apart from the decisions made by God, because God's commands are what create our duty. Virtue ethics takes a similar approach to morality, though many of its versions, including Aristotle's, are secular.~~

~~Virtue ethics tells us that it is the actions of virtuous people, rather than God's commands, that determine what is right or wrong. According to virtue ethicists, people aren't virtuous because they do right; actions are right because they are done by the virtuous.~~

~~Virtue ethics and the divine command theory share a basic structure. And they share a basic weakness. We can see this by posing a familiar dilemma.~~ Virtuous people either have, or don't have, good reasons for their actions. (1) If they lack good reasons, then their actions are arbitrary, and can't possibly serve as the standard of morality. (2) If they do have good reasons to support their actions, then these reasons, rather than the choices of good people, determine what is right and wrong.

The second option is the better one. We must suppose that virtuous people act on good reasons, or else they wouldn't really be virtuous. Consider ~~again~~ the immorality of rape, and the many reasons why it is wrong.

A virtuous person is one who is aware of these reasons and takes them to heart. Rape is wrong not because good people oppose it. They oppose it because it is wrong.

This approach preserves the integrity, the wisdom, and the goodness of the virtuous person. But there is naturally a cost. And it is steep. The cost is that the virtue ethicist's account of right action is directly threatened. That account tells us that acts are morally right *just because* all virtuous people would perform them in the circumstances, and wrong just because such people would refrain. But as we have seen, the choices of virtuous people do not make actions right or wrong.

~~We can still look to virtuous role models for reliable guidance on how to act. But their choices do not turn otherwise neutral actions into ones that are right (or wrong). They are not so powerful as that.~~ Virtuous people have keen insight into the reasons that make actions moral or immoral. They feel the compelling force of these reasons, and act accordingly. That is what makes them virtuous.

If this line of criticism is on target, then we have an explanation of why so many moral theories give priority to duty over virtue. We need to explain virtue in terms of duty, because we would otherwise be left with a picture of virtuous people that makes their choices arbitrary. But if that is so, then virtue ethics is in trouble, since one of its fundamental points is that rightness is defined in terms of the choices of the virtuous.

Conclusion

Virtue ethics represents an exciting continuation of an ancient tradition. It has a variety of attractions, not least of which is its emphasis on the importance of moral character. It represents a pluralistic approach to morality, and has interesting things to say about ethical complexity, moral education, the importance of moral wisdom, and the nature of the good life. Many of the criticisms that have been leveled at it can be met once we dig a bit deeper, or introduce small changes to the theory.

But no ethical theory, at least in its present state, is immune to all real difficulties, and virtue ethics, too, has its vulnerable points. The greatest of these takes aim at one of its central claims: that right action must be understood by reference to virtue, rather than the other way around. Perhaps virtue can really enjoy this sort of priority. But it will take a great deal of further work to show it so.

Discussion Questions

1. How might a person do the right thing but still fail to be morally admirable? How does virtue ethics account for this?
2. How do we come to know what the right thing to do is in a particular situation, according to virtue ethics? How does this account of moral knowledge differ from the accounts given by previously discussed theories? Which do you find more attractive?
3. Aristotle believed that being a virtuous person was essential to one's life going well. Do you agree? What reasons can be given in support of this position?
4. ~~What are tragic dilemmas? How might they pose a problem for virtue ethics?~~
5. Does virtue ethics demand too much of us? Why or why not?
6. Virtuous people sometimes disagree with one another about which actions are right. Is this a problem for virtue ethics? Why or why not?
7. What is the priority problem for virtue ethics? Do you think the virtue ethicist has an adequate reply to this problem?

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