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AN ANTHOLOGY
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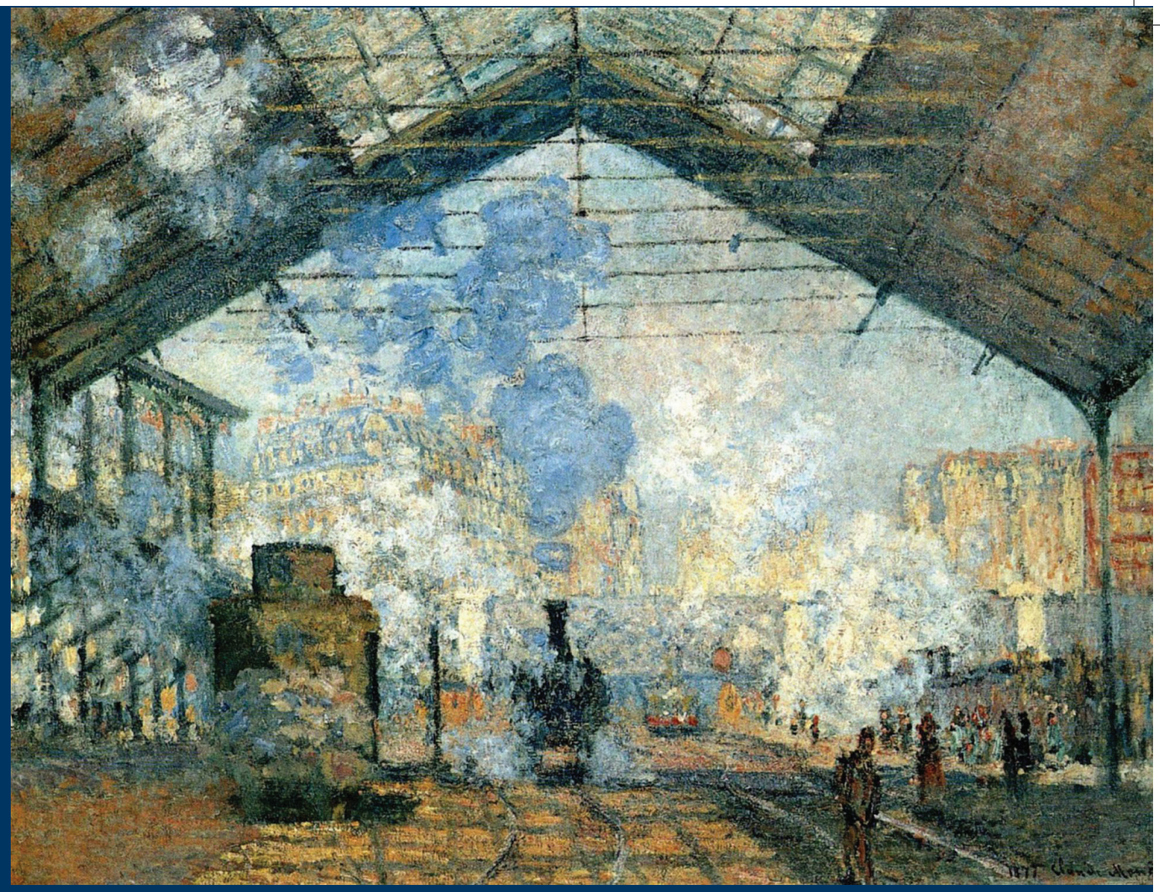

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Ethics in Practice

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An Anthology

FIFTH EDITION

Edited by

Hugh LaFollette

University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

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Preface for Instructors

This anthology seeks to provide engagingly written, carefully argued philosophical essays on a wide range of important, contemporary moral issues. When I had trouble finding essays that suited those purposes, I commissioned new ones – twelve for this edition. I also invited a number of philosophers to revise their "classic" essays – seven for this edition. Altogether, well over half of the essays herein were written or revised specifically for *Ethics in Practice*. This edition includes five introductory essays, including a new one entitled "The Basics of Argumentation."

The result is a tasty blend of the old and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar. I have organized the book into four thematic sections and fourteen topics to give you the greatest flexibility to construct the course you want. When feasible, I begin or end a section with an essay that connects the current topic to ones discussed in preceding or following sections.

Although I have included essays I think introductory students can read and comprehend, no one would believe me if I averred that all the essays are easy to read. We know many students have trouble reading philosophical essays. After all, many of these essays were written originally for other professional philosophers, not first-year undergraduates. Moreover, even when philosophers write expressly for introductory audiences, their ideas, vocabularies, and styles are often foreign to the introductory student. So, I have included a brief introduction on "Reading Philosophy" to advise students on how to read and understand philosophical essays.

I want this volume to be suitable for an array of ethics and moral issues courses. The most straightforward way to use the text is to assign essays on six or seven of your favorite practical issues. If you want a more topical course, you could emphasize issues in one or more of the major thematic sections. You could also focus on practical and theoretical issues spanning individual topics and major divisions of the book. If, for instance, you want to focus on gender, you could select most essays from two sections – Abortion and Discrimination, Racism, and Sexism – and many of the essays in the section on Biomedical Technologies. Finally, you can also give your course a decided theoretical flavor by using the section on Ethical Theory, and then selecting essays that address, in diverse contexts, significant theoretical issues like the act/omission (or doing/allowing) distinction, the determination of moral status, the limits of morality, and so on. You can also direct your students to "Theorizing about Ethics" – a brief introductory essay designed to help them understand why we should theorize, and then giving them a snapshot of major theories.

The section introductions focus on theory and its role in moral deliberations. Some anthologies do not have section introductions. Most that do often use them simply to summarize that section's articles. The introductions in this anthology do indicate the main thrust of each essay. However, that is not their primary function. Their purpose is (1) to focus students' attention on the theoretical issues at stake, and (2) to relate those issues to the discussion of other essays in that section or essays on different moral topics. All too often students (and philosophers) see practical ethics as a hodgepodge of wholly or largely unrelated issues. These introductions should go some way toward undermining that view. They show students that practical issues are not discrete, but intricately connected. Thinking

carefully about any issue invariably illuminates (and is illuminated by) others. By expressly revealing these connections, these introductions fulfill an overarching aim to make this volume cohere better than many anthologies.

There are consequences of this strategy you might mention to your students. I organized the order of the papers within each section to maximize the students' understanding of that practical issue – nothing more. However, I wrote the introductions and organized the summaries to maximize the understanding of theoretical issues. Often the order of the discussion of essays in the introduction parallels the order of essays in that section; occasionally it does not. Moreover, I spend more time "summarizing" some of these essays. That in no way suggests that the essays on which I focus are more cogent, useful, or in any way superior to the others. Rather, I found it easier to use them as entrées into the theoretical debates.

Finally, since I do not know which sections you will use, you should be aware that the introductions will likely refer to essays the students will not read. When that happens, the introductions will not fully realize one of their aims. Nonetheless, they may still be valuable. For even if the students do not read the essays to which an introduction refers, they can better appreciate the interconnections between issues. It might even have the delicious consequence of encouraging some students to read an essay that you did not assign.

One last note about the criteria for selecting essays. Many practical ethics anthologies include essays on opposing sides of every issue. For most topics that is a laudable aim that an editor can normally achieve. But not always. I include essays that discuss the issue as we currently frame and understand it. Sometimes that understanding precludes some positions that would have once been part of the debate. For instance, early practical ethics anthologies included essays that argued that an individual should always choose to prolong her life, by any medical means whatever. On this view, euthanasia of any sort and for any reason was immoral. Although that was once a common and viable position, virtually no one now advocates or even discusses it. Even the author of the essay with serious misgivings about a "right to die" would not endorse it. The current euthanasia debate largely concerns when people might choose not to sustain their lives, how they might carry out their wishes, and with whose assistance. Those are the questions addressed by the essays on euthanasia.

Likewise, I do not have any essays that argue that women and African Americans ought to be relegated to the bedroom or cotton field. Although everyone acknowledges that racism and sexism are still alive and well in the United States, few people openly advocate making Blacks and women second class citizens. No one seriously discusses these proposals in academic circles. Instead, I include essays that highlight current issues concerning the treatment of minorities and women (sexual harassment, date rape, implicit bias, etc.).

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General Introduction

All of us make choices. Some of these appear to concern only ourselves: what to wear, when to sleep, what to read, where to live, how to decorate our homes, and what to eat. Under most circumstances these choices are purely personal. Purely personal concerns are beyond the scope of morality as ordinarily understood, and will not be discussed in this book. Other choices demonstrably affect others: whether to prolong the life of our comatose grandmother, when and with whom to have sex, how to relate to people of different races, and whether to support capital punishment or laws against cloning. These choices clearly affect others and are normally thought to be choices we should morally assess.

Upon closer examination, however, we see that it is not always obvious whether a choice affects only us. Is choosing to view pornography personal or does it support the degradation of women? Is eating meat purely personal or does it encourage and sustain the inhumane treatment of animals or the depletion of resources that we could use to feed the starving? Is choosing where to live purely personal or does it sometimes support racist practices that confine African-Americans or Hispanics or Asians to inadequate housing? If so, then some choices that *seem* purely personal turn out to affect others in morally significant ways.

In short, once we reflect carefully on our choices, we discover that many might profoundly affect others, and therefore, that we ought to evaluate them morally. By choosing to buy a new stereo rather than send money for famine relief, children in India may starve. By choosing to support political candidates who oppose or support abortion, tough drug laws, affirmative action, or environmental protection, I affect others in demonstrably significant ways. Of course knowing that our choices affect others does not yet tell us how we should behave. It does, however, confirm that we should evaluate those choices morally. Unfortunately many of us are individually and collectively nearsighted: we fail to see or appreciate the moral significance of our choices, thereby increasing the evil in the world. Often we talk and think as if evil resulted solely from the conscious choices of wholly evil people. I suspect, however, that evil results more often from ignorance and inattention: we just don't notice or attend to the significance of what we do (LaFollette, H. 2017). A central aim of this book is to improve our moral vision: to help us notice and comprehend the moral significance of what we do.

The primary means of achieving this end is to present essays that carefully and critically discuss a range of practical moral issues. These essays will supply information you likely do not have and perspectives you may not have not considered. Many of you may find that your education has ill-prepared you to think carefully about these issues. Far too many public schools in the United States neither expect nor even permit students to think critically. Many of them will not have expected you – or wanted you – to develop and defend your own views. Instead, many will have demanded that you memorize the content of your texts and the assertions of your teachers, only to regurgitate them on a test.

Ethics in Practice: An Anthology, Fifth Edition. Edited by Hugh LaFollette.

Philosophy professors, in contrast, do not standardly expect or want you to memorize what they or someone else says. Still less will they want you to parrot them or the texts. They require you to read what others have said, but not because they want you to recite it. Instead, these professors contend that critically reading the arguments of others will help you will better reach your own conclusions. For those of you who find that your high school education, with its premium on memorization and blind adherence to authority, did not prepare you to read philosophical essays, I have included a brief section on "Reading Philosophy."

I also include a brief introductory essay on ethical theorizing. Philosophers do not discuss practical issues in a vacuum. They place their discussions in a larger context that helps clarify and define the practical issues. They discuss not only the details peculiar to the issue, but more general features that are relevant to many practical moral quandaries. That essay will explain the purpose of "Theorizing about Ethics." The essay will also briefly describe some prominent ethical theories that you will encounter in these pages. You will see, as you read individual essays, that some authors provide detailed explanations of these theories.

Additionally, I include an introductory essay on "Writing a Philosophy Paper." Some of what I say will overlap themes from several of the earlier introductions. However, since I know not all teachers will assign, and not all students will read, all of the introductions, I think this is unavoidable. My aim is to briefly describe a variety of papers you might be asked to write, and talk about what you should do to make your papers as strong as possible.

Finally, to augment your familiarity with various theories, I will, in the introductions to each section, not only summarize the central themes of the essays but also spotlight some general theoretical questions and explain how these are relevant to other issues discussed in this volume. It is important to appreciate the myriad ways in which practical moral issues are woven together by common theoretical threads. Practical ethics is not a random collection of disconnected issues, but a systematic exploration of how we can most responsibly act in a variety of practical moral contexts.

Consequently, this is not a recipe book that answers all moral questions. Rather, it is a chronicle of how a number of philosophers have thought about these practical moral issues. If you absorb the information the authors' supply, attend to their arguments, and consider the diverse perspectives they offer, you will find, when the course is over, that you are better able to think carefully and critically about practical and theoretical moral issues. Since arguments play such a key role in these essays, and many of you may be unfamiliar with the best ways of understanding and critiquing arguments, I have included an introductory essay on "The Basics of Argumentation."

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Theorizing about Ethics

When deciding what to do, we are often uncertain of, confused about, or have conflicts between, our inclinations, desires, interests, and beliefs. These difficulties can be present even when we want to promote only our self-interests. We might not know what is in our best interests: we may have simply adopted some mistaken ideas of our parents, our friends, or our culture. For instance, were our parents Nazis, we might believe that maintaining racial purity is an extremely important personal aim. We may also confuse our wants with our interests: we want to manipulate others for our own ends and therefore mistakenly infer that caring for others always or usually undermines our interests (LaFollette, H. 1996: chapters 3 and 13). Even when we know some of our interests, we might be unable to determine their relative importance: we may assume that wealth is more important than developing character and having close relationships. Other times we may know our interests and desires, but be unsure of how to resolve conflicts between them: I might need to write a paper, yet want to hike the local mountain. Finally, even if I know the best choice, I may not act on it: I may know that it is in my best long-term interest to lose weight, yet inhale that scrumptious pie instead.

These complications show why I can best pursue my self-interests only if I self-critically and rationally deliberate about them. I must sometimes step back and think more abstractly about (a) what it means for something to be an interest (rather than a mere desire), (b) how to detect which behavior or goals are most likely to advance those interests, and (c) how to understand the interconnections between my interests (e.g., the ways that health enhances my chance of achieving other interests). Finally, I must (d) find a procedure for coping with conflicts between interests, and (e) learn how to act on the outcome of my rational deliberations. Abstraction from and theorizing about practice improves practice and helps us act more prudently.

Of course, many actions do not concern simply ourselves; they also affect others. Some of my actions benefit others while some harm them. The benefit or harm may be direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional. I might directly harm Joe by pushing him. I might push him because I am angry with him or because I want his place in the queue. I could indirectly harm Joe by landing a promotion he needs to finance nursing care for his dying mother. Or I might offend Joe by privately engaging in what he considers kinky sex. In the latter case, my bedroom antics affect him, although only indirectly and only because he holds the particular moral beliefs he does. Arguably it is inappropriate to say that I harmed Joe in these last two cases, although I did choose to act knowing my actions might make him unhappy or nauseated.

In choosing how to behave, I should acknowledge that my actions may affect others, even if only indirectly. In these circumstances, I must choose whether to pursue my self-interest or whether to promote (or at least not setback) the interests of others. Other times I must choose to act in ways that harm some while benefitting others. If I am fortunate, I might occasionally find ways to promote everyone's interests without harming anyone's.

Understanding these distinctions does not settle the question of how I should act. It only circumscribes the arena within which morality operates. Morality, traditionally understood, involves primarily, and perhaps exclusively, behavior that affects others. I say "perhaps"

because some philosophers (e.g., Kant) thought that anyone who harms him or herself, for instance, by squandering their talents or abusing their body, has done something morally wrong. For present purposes, though, we can set this issue aside. For what everyone acknowledges is that actions that indisputably affect others should be evaluated morally – although we might disagree about how that judgment should shape our action. We might further disagree whether and to what extent actions that affect others only indirectly should be evaluated morally. We may further disagree about whether and how to morally distinguish direct from indirect harm. Nonetheless, if someone's action directly and substantially affects others (either benefits or harms them), then even if we do not yet know whether the action is right or wrong, we can agree that we should evaluate it morally.

This discussion might suggest that most, if not all, moral decisions are complicated or confusing. Not so. Many moral "decisions" are so easy that we never think about them. No one seriously asks whether it is morally permissible to drug a classmate so one can have sex with them, whether one should steal money from co-workers to finance a vacation on the Riviera, or whether an individual should knowingly infect someone with AIDS. This is not the stuff of which moral disagreement is made. We know quite well that such actions are wrong. Rather than discuss questions to which there are obvious answers, we focus on, think about, and debate those about which there is genuine disagreement.

However, we sometimes think a decision is easy to make, when, in fact, it is not. This is an equally (or arguably more) serious mistake. We may fail to see the conflicts, confusions, or uncertainties: the issue may be so complicated that we overlook, fail to understand, or do not appreciate how (and how profoundly) our actions affect others. If we are preoccupied with our self-interest, we may not see the ways our behavior significantly affects others or else we give inadequate weight to their interests. Finally, our unquestioning acceptance of the moral status quo can blind us to just how wrong some of our behaviors and social institutions are.

The Need for Theory

We may think that an action is grossly immoral, but not know why. Or we may think we know, only to discover, upon careful examination, that we are merely parroting "reasons" offered by our friends, teachers, parents, or preachers. There is nothing wrong with considering how others think and how they have decided similar moral questions. We would be foolish not to absorb and benefit from other's deliberations. However, anyone even faintly aware of history will acknowledge that collective moral wisdom, like individual moral wisdom, is sometimes horribly mistaken (see Mill's "Freedom of Thought and Discussion," Chapter 32 in this volume). Our ancestors held slaves, denied women the right to vote, practiced genocide, and burned witches at the stake. I suspect most of these ancestors were generally morally decent people who were firmly convinced that their actions were moral. They acted wrongly because they failed to be sufficiently self-critical. They did not evaluate their own beliefs; they unquestioningly adopted the outlook of their ancestors, political leaders, teachers, friends, and community. In these ways they are not unique. This is a "sin" of which each of us is guilty. The resounding lesson of history is that we must scrutinize our beliefs, our choices, and our actions to ensure that we are informed, consistent, imaginative, unbiased, and that we are not mindlessly reciting the views and aping the vices of others. Otherwise we may perpetrate evils we could avoid, evils for which future generations will rightly condemn us (LaFollette, H. 2017).

To critically evaluate our moral views we should theorize about ethics: we should think about moral issues more abstractly, more coherently, and more consistently. Theorizing is not some enterprise divorced from practice, but is simply the careful, systematic, and thoughtful reflection on practice. Theorizing will not insulate us from error. However, it will empower us to shed ill-conceived, uninformed, and irrelevant considerations. To explain what I mean, let's think briefly about a matter dear to most students: grades. My grading of students' work can go awry in at least three different ways.

1 I might use an inconsistent grading standard. I may use different standards for different students: Joan gets an A because she has a pleasant smile; Ralph, because he works hard; Rachel, because her paper was exceptional. Of course knowing that I need a consistent grading standard would not reveal which standards I should have employed or what grades students should have received. Perhaps they all deserved the As they received. However, it is not enough that I accidentally gave them the grades they

deserved. I should have given them As *because they deserved them*, not because of some irrelevant considerations. If I employ irrelevant considerations, I will often give students the wrong grades, even if, in some cases, I give them appropriate ones.

2 I might be guided by improper grading standards. It is not enough that I have a consistent standard. I might have a flawed standard to which I adhere unwaveringly. For instance, I might consistently give students I like higher grades than students I dislike. If so, then I grade their work inappropriately, even if consistently.

3 I might employ the standards inappropriately. I might have appropriate and consistent grading standards, yet misapply them because I am ignorant, close-minded, exhausted, preoccupied, or inattentive.

I can make parallel mistakes in ethical deliberations.

1 I might use inconsistent ethical principles.
2 I might hold inappropriate moral standards.
3 I might employ appropriate moral standards inappropriately.

Let us look at each deliberative error in more detail.

1) **Consistency**. We should treat two creatures the same unless they are relevantly different – different in ways that justify treating them differently. Just as students expect teachers to grade consistently, we expect others (and hopefully ourselves) to be morally consistent. The demand for consistency pervades moral thinking. A common strategy for defending our moral views is to claim that we are consistent; a common strategy for criticizing others' views is to charge that they are not.

The argumentative role of consistency is evident in the discussion of every practical moral issue. Consider its role in the abortion debate. Disputants spend considerable effort arguing that their own positions are consistent while charging that their opponents' positions are not. Each side labors to show why abortion is (or is not) relevantly similar to standard cases of murder. Most of those who think abortion is immoral (and likely all of those who think it should be illegal) claim abortion is relevantly similar to murder, while those who think abortion should be legal claim it is not. What we do not find are people who think abortion is indisputable murder and indisputably moral.

Consistency likewise plays central roles in debates over Free Speech and Paternalism and Risk. Those opposed to censorship often argue that books, pictures, movies, plays, or sculptures that some people want to censor are relevantly similar to art that most people do not want censored. They further claim that pornography is a form of speech, and if we prohibit it *because the majority finds it offensive*, then we must censor any speech that offends the majority. Conversely, those who claim we can legitimately censor pornography go to some pains to explain why pornography is relevantly different from other forms of speech we want to protect. Both sides want to show that their position is consistent and that their opponent's position is not.

Although consistency is generally recognized as a requirement of morality, in specific cases it is difficult to detect if someone is being (in)consistent. Someone may appear to act inconsistently, but only because we do not appreciate the complexity of his or her moral reasoning or fail to understand the morally relevant features framing their action. Nonetheless, what everyone acknowledges is that *if* someone is being inconsistent, then that is a compelling reason to doubt their position.

2) **Correct principles**. It is not enough to be consistent. We must also employ the appropriate guidelines, principles, or standards, or make the appropriate judgments. Theorizing about ethics is one good way to discern the best (most defensible) standards or guidelines, to identify the morally relevant features of our actions, to enhance our ability to make good judgments. Later I discuss how to select and defend these principles: how we determine what is morally relevant.

3) **Correct "application."** Even when we know what is morally relevant, and even when we reason consistently, we may still make moral mistakes. Consider the ways I might misapply rules prohibiting (a) lying and (b) harming another's feelings. Suppose my wife comes home wearing a gaudy sweater. She wants to know if I like it. Presumably I should neither lie nor intentionally hurt her feelings. What, in these circumstances, should I do? There are a number of ways I might act inappropriately. 1) *I may not see viable alternatives*: I might assume, for example, that I must baldly lie or else significantly hurt her feelings. 2) *I may be insufficiently attentive to her needs, interests, and abilities*: I could over- or under-estimate how much she will be hurt by my honesty (or lack of it). 3) *I may be unduly influenced by self-interest or*

personal bias: I might lie, not to protect her feelings, but because I don't want her to be angry with me. 4) *I may know precisely what I should do, but be insufficiently motivated to do it:* I might lie because I just don't want the hassle. 5) Or, *I may be motivated to act as I should, but lack the talent or skill to do it*: I might want to be honest, but lack the verbal and personal skills to be honest in a way that will not hurt her feelings.

These are all failings with practical moral significance. We would all be better off if we would learn how to make ourselves more attentive, more informed, and better motivated. However, although these are vitally important practical concerns, they are not the primary focus of most essays in this book. What these authors do here is provide relevant information, careful logical analysis, and a clear account of what they take to be the morally relevant features of practical ethical questions.

Is it Just a Matter of Opinion?

Many of you might find talk of moral standards troubling. You may think – certainly many people talk as if they think – that moral judgments are just "matters of opinion." All of us have overheard people conclude a debate about a contentious moral issue by saying: "Well, it is all just a matter of opinion!" I suspect the real function of this claim is to signal the speaker's desire to terminate discussion. Unfortunately this claim implies more. It suggests that since moral judgments are *just* opinions, then all moral judgments are equally good (or equally bad). It implies that we cannot criticize or rationally scrutinize ours or anyone else's moral judgments. After all, we don't rationally criticize *mere* opinions ("I don't like French kissing" or "I prefer purple walls to blue ones").

However, even if no (contentious) moral judgment were *indisputably* correct, we should not infer that all moral judgments are equally (un)reliable. Although we may well have no clear way of deciding with certainty which actions are best, we have excellent ways of showing that some actions are morally defective. For instance, we know that moral judgments based on misinformation, shortsightedness, bias, lack of understanding, or wholly bizarre moral principles are flawed. Conversely, judgments are more plausible if they are based on full information, careful calculation, astute perception, and if they have successfully survived the criticism of others in the marketplace of ideas.

Consider the following analogy: no grammatical or stylistic rules will determine precisely the way I should phrase the next sentence. However, from that we should not infer that I may stylistically string together just any words. Some arrangements of words are not sentences; some grammatically complete sentences are gibberish. Other sentences are grammatically well formed, relevant, and minimally clear, yet may be imprecise. Others may be comprehensible, relevant, and generally precise, yet still be bereft of style. Some others might be grammatically well formed and even stylish, yet inappropriate because they are not connected to the sentences that precede or follow them. Still others may be wholly adequate, sufficiently adequate so that there is no strong reason to prefer one. A few may be brilliant. No grammar book will enable us to make all those distinctions or to identify a uniquely best sentence. Nonetheless, we have no problem distinguishing the trashy or the unacceptably vague from the linguistically sublime. In short, we needn't think that one sentence is uniquely good to acknowledge that some are better and some are worse. Likewise for ethics. We may not always know how to act; we may find substantial disagreement about some highly contentious ethical issues. However, that does not show that all moral views are created equal.

We should also not ignore the obvious fact that circumstances often demand that we act even if there is no (or we cannot discern a) uniquely superior moral action. Nonetheless, our uncertainty does not lead us to think that – or act as if – all views were equal. We do not toss a coin to decide whether to remove our parents from life support, whether to save a small child from drowning in a pond, or whether someone charged with a felony is guilty. We (should) strive to make an informed decision based on the best evidence and then act accordingly, even if the best evidence does not guarantee certainty. We should not bemoan our inability to be certain that we have found the uniquely best action; we must simply make the best choice we can. We should, of course, acknowledge our uncertainty, admit our fallibility, and be prepared to consider new ideas, especially when they are supported by strong arguments. However, we have no need to embrace any pernicious forms of relativism. That would be not only misguided, but morally mistaken.

The Role of Theory

Even when people agree that an issue should be evaluated by criteria of morality, they may disagree about how to evaluate it. Using the language of the previous section, they may disagree about the best principles or judgments, about how these are to be interpreted, or about how they should be deployed. Anti-abortionists argue that abortion should be illegal because the fetus has the same right to life as a normal adult, while pro-abortionists argue that it should be legal since the woman has the right to decide what happens in and to her body. Supporters of capital punishment argue that executions deter crime, while opponents argue that it is cruel and inhumane. Those who want to censor pornography claim it degrades women or offends some people's moral sensitivities, while supporters argue that it is a form of free speech that should be protected by law.

In giving reasons for their judgments, people cite some features of the action they think explain or support their evaluation. This function of reasons is not confined to ethical disagreements. I may justify my claim that "*Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* is a good movie" by claiming that it has well-defined characters, an interesting plot, and appropriate dramatic tension. That is, I identify features of the movie that I think justify my evaluation. The features I cite, however, are not unique to this movie. In giving these reasons I imply that "having well-defined characters" or "having an interesting plot" or "having the appropriate dramatic tension" are important characteristics of good movies, period. That is not to say these are the only or the most important characteristics. Nor is it yet to decide how weighty these characteristics are. It is, however, to say that we have *a* reason to think that a movie with these characteristics is a good movie.

You can challenge my evaluation of the movie in three ways: you can challenge my criteria, the weight I give those criteria, or my claim that the movie satisfies them. For instance, you could argue that having well-defined characters is not a relevant criterion, that I have given that criterion too much weight, or, that *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* does not have well-defined characters. In defense, I could explain why it is a relevant criterion, why I have given the criterion the appropriate weight, and why the movie's characters are well developed. At this point we are discussing issues at two different levels. We are debating both the criteria of good movies and how to evaluate a particular movie.

Likewise, when discussing a practical ethical issue, we are not only discussing that issue, we are employing and investigating diverse theoretical perspectives. We do not want to know only whether capital punishment deters crime, we also want to know whether deterrence is morally important, and, if so, just how important. When theorizing reaches a certain level or complexity, we begin to speak of someone's "having a theory." Ethical theories are simply formal and more systematic discussions of second level, theoretical discussions. These are philosophers' efforts to identify the relevant moral criteria, the weight or significance of each criterion, and to offer some guidance about how to determine whether an action satisfies those criteria. In the next section, I briefly outline the more familiar ethical theories. But before I do, let me first offer a warning. In thinking about ethical theories, we may be tempted to assume that people who hold the same theory will make the same practical ethical judgments, and that people who make the same practical ethical judgments will embrace the same theory. Neither is true. It is not true of any evaluative judgments. For instance, two people with similar criteria for good movies may differently evaluate *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri*, while two people who loved it may have (somewhat) different criteria for good movies. Likewise for ethics. Two people with different ethical theories may nonetheless agree that abortion is morally permitted (or grossly immoral), while two supporters of abortion may embrace different moral theories. Knowing someone's theoretical commitments does not tell us precisely what actions he or she thinks are right and wrong. It tells us only how they think about moral issues; it identifies that person's criteria of relevance and the weight he or she gives to them.

Main Types of Theory

Two broad classes of ethical theory – consequentialist and deontological – have shaped most people's understanding of ethics. Consequentialists hold that we should choose the available action with the best overall

consequences, while deontologists hold that we should act in ways circumscribed by moral rules or rights, and that these rules or rights are defined somewhat independently of consequences (see Chapter 3 on "Rights"). Since this book includes a separate section on Ethical Theory, this exposition will be brief. Nonetheless, these descriptions should be sufficient to help you understand the broad outlines of each theory.

Consequentialism

Consequentialists claim that we are morally obligated to act in ways that produce the best consequences. It is not difficult to see why this is an appealing theory. It employs the same style of reasoning we use in purely prudential (self-interested) decisions. If you are trying to select a major, you will consider the available options, predict which one will likely lead to the best overall outcome, and then choose that major. If you are trying to decide whether to keep your present job or take a new one, you will consider the consequences of each (working conditions, location, salary, chance of advancement, how the change might alter your personal and family relations, etc.), and then choose the one with the best overall consequences.

Despite these similarities, prudence and morality are importantly different. Whereas prudence requires that we wisely advance only our own personal interests, consequentialism requires us to consider the interests of all affected. When facing a moral decision, we should consider available alternative actions, trace the likely consequences of each for all affected, and then select the one with the best overall consequences.

Of course, a consequentialist need not consider every consequence of an action, nor must they consider them all equally. Two consequences of my typing this introduction are that I am strengthening the muscles in my hands and increasing my eye–hand coordination. However, barring unusual circumstances, these are not morally relevant: they are neither a means to nor a constituent of my or anyone else's welfare, happiness, or well-being. That is why they play no role in *moral* deliberation. However, it is not always clear whether or why some consequence is morally relevant. Many moral disagreements are at base disputes over whether or how much some consequence is morally relevant. That is why any adequate consequentialist theory must specify (a) which consequences are morally relevant (i.e., which we should consider when morally deliberating), and (b) how much weight we should give them.

Utilitarians, for instance, claim we should choose the option that maximizes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." They also advocate complete equality: "each to count as one and no more than one." Of course we might disagree about exactly what it means to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number; still more we might be unsure about how this is to be achieved. Act utilitarians claim that we determine the rightness of an action if we can decide which action, in those circumstances, would be most likely to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Rule utilitarians reject the idea that moral decisions should be case-by-case. On their view, we should decide not whether a *particular* action is likely to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but whether a particular *type* of action would, if done by everyone (or most people), promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

This theory is discussed in more detail by Shaw in Chapter 1.

Deontology

Deontological theories are most easily understood in contrast to consequentialist ones. Whereas consequentialists claim we should always strive to promote the best consequences, deontologists claim that our moral obligations – whatever they are – are *in some ways* independent of consequences. Thus, if I have obligations not to kill or steal or lie, those obligations are not justified *simply* on the ground that doing these behaviors will always produce the best consequences.

That is why many people find deontological theories so attractive. For example, most of us would be offended if someone lied to us, even if the lie produced the greatest happiness for the greatest number. I would certainly be offended if someone killed me, even if my death might produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number (you use my kidneys to save two people's lives, my heart to save someone else's life, etc.). The deontologist claims that the rightness or wrongness of lying or killing cannot be explained wholly by its consequences. Of course deontologists disagree about which rules or standards are true, how we can determine

them, and whether they can ever be ignored because acting on them would have bad – even horrible – consequences. Some claim abstract reason shows us how we should act (Kant 2002/1785). Others talk about discovering principles that are justified in *reflective equilibrium* (Rawls, e.g., Chapter 55 in the selection on Economic Justice), while some claim we should seek principles that an ideal observer might adopt (Arthur, Chapter 62 in Global Justice).

These theories are discussed in more detail by McNaughton and Rawling in Chapter 2, as well as Rainbolt in Chapter 3 (Ethical Theory).

Alternatives

There are numerous alternatives to these theories. To call them "alternatives" does not imply that they are inferior, only that they have not played the same role in shaping contemporary ethical thought. Two are especially worth mention since they have become influential in the past four decades; they also play pivotal roles in several essays in this book.

Virtue theory

Virtue theory predates both consequentialism and deontology as a formal theory. It was the dominant theory of the ancient Greeks, reaching its clearest expression in the Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. For many centuries it was neither discussed nor advocated as a serious competitor. But by the late 1950s, it was starting to reappear in the philosophical literature (the history of this re-emergence is traced in the essays reprinted in Crisp, R. and Slote, M. A. (1997).

Much of the appeal of virtue theory arises from the perceived failings of the standard alternatives. Deontology and consequentialism, virtue theorists claim, put inadequate (or no) emphasis on the agent – on the ways he or she should *be*, or the kinds of *character* the agent should develop. Relatedly, they fail to give appropriate scope to personal judgment and put too much emphasis on following rules, whether deontological or consequentialistic.

On some readings of deontology and utilitarianism, it sounds as if advocates of these theorists believed that a moral decision was the mindless application of a moral rule. If the rule says "Be honest," then we should be honest. If the rule says "Always act to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number," then we need only figure out which action has the most desirable consequences and do it. Ethics thus seems to resemble math. The calculations may require patience and care, but they do not require judgment.

Many advocates of the standard theories find these objections by virtue theorists telling and, over the past two decades, have modified their respective theories to (partially) accommodate them. The result, says Rosalind Hursthouse, is "that the lines of demarcation between these three approaches have become blurred. … Deontology and utilitarianism are no longer perspicuously identified by describing them as emphasizing rules or consequences in contrast to character" (Hursthouse, R. 1999: 4). Both put more emphasis on judgment and character. For instance, Hill, who is a deontologist, describes the proper attitude toward the Environment in a way that emphasizes excellence or character (Chapter 25), while Strikwerda and May (Discrimination, Racism and Sexism), who do not generally embrace virtue theory, emphasize the need for men to feel shame for their complicity in the rape of women (Chapter 42). However, although judgment and character may play increasingly important roles in contemporary versions of deontology or consequentialism, neither plays the central role they do in virtue theory. This is evident, for instance, in Hursthouse's discussion of Abortion (Chapter 14) and in her essay on Virtue Theory (Chapter 2 in Ethical Theory).

Feminist theory

Historically most philosophers were men; most embraced the sexism of their respective cultures. Thus, it is not surprising that women's interests and perspectives played no role in the development of standard ethical theories. Does that mean these theories are useless? Or can they be salvaged? Can we merely prune Aristotle's explicit sexism from his theory and still have an Aristotelian theory that is adequate for a less sexist age? Can we remove Kant's sexism and have a non-sexist deontology?

In the early years of feminism, many thinkers thought so. They claimed that the standard ethical theories' emphasis on justice, equality, and fairness offer all the argumentative ammunition women need to claim their rightful place in the public world. Others were not so sure. Carol Gilligan (1982) argued that women have

different moral experiences and different moral reasoning, and that these differences must be incorporated into our understanding of morality. She advocated an "Ethics of Care," which she claimed best exemplified women's experience and thinking. However, other feminists claimed this view too closely resembles old-fashioned views of women. What we need instead, they claim, are theories that have a keen awareness of gender and a concern to develop all people's unique human capacities (Jaggar, A. M. 2000).

Observe the ways that issues concerning woman are discussed (DISCRIMINATION, RACISM, AND SEXISM, ABORTION, FREE SPEECH, and BIOMEDICAL TECHNOLOGIES). See whether the reasons used differ from those employed in other essays. If so, how?

Conclusion

As you read the following essays, you will see how these different ways of thinking about ethics shape our deliberations about particular moral issues. Be alert to these theoretical differences. They will help you better understand the essays. Also pay close attention to the section introductions. These highlight the theoretical issues that play a central role within that section.

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Reading Philosophy

Reading philosophy differs from reading a Twitter feed, the daily newspaper, or science fiction. The subjects are different; the purposes are different; the styles are different. A Twitter feed either informs us of some occurrence – ranging from trivial to significant – or broadcasts its author's quick thought or reaction. Sometimes it urges us to action. It typically achieves these ends with loaded language, splashed with a generous dosage of all capital letters or internet abbreviations, dotted with relevant emoji. Newspapers inform us of significant political, social, cultural, economic, and climatic events. Once we are informed, we can presumably make better decisions about our leaders, our finances, and our social lives. The media typically achieves these aims by giving us the facts, just the facts. They usually present these facts in a pithy writing style. Science fiction attempts to transport us imaginatively to distant worlds of larger-than-life heroes and villains. It aims to entertain us, to divert us from the doldrums of our daily lives, and perhaps even to empower us: having seen the glories or evils of worlds not-yet experienced, we may be better equipped to face everyday problems. Science fiction writers achieve these aims by spinning a convincing narrative of (often imaginary) creatures living in our current world or previously unknown worlds; it heightens our imaginative powers through expressive language.

Philosophers have neither the direct aims of the journalist nor the airy aims of the science fiction novelist. Their primary function is not to inform or to inspire, but to help us explore competing ideas and the reasons for them. The philosopher achieves these aims by employing a writing style that tends to be neither pithy nor expressive. The style likely differs from any with which you are accustomed.

Philosophical Language

While the reporter and the novelist write for the public, philosophers usually write for one other. Thus, while most newspapers and some science fiction are written for an eighth-grade audience, philosophical essays are written for people with university training. That is why you will need a more robust vocabulary to understand a philosophical essay than you will to understand the latest novel or a column in the local paper. Keep a dictionary handy to look up "ordinary" words you may not yet know. You will also face an additional problem with these essays' vocabularies. Philosophy, like all academic disciplines, employs specialized terms. Some of these are familiar words with specialized meanings; others are words unique to the discipline. To fully grasp philosophical writing, you will need to understand both. Do not despair. Often you can roughly determine the term's meaning from its context. If, after doing your best, you still cannot understand its meaning, ask your instructor. Most of these words can be explained in a clear, non-technical way. You can also consult on-line philosophical dictionaries or encyclopedia (see the link on this book's supporting web page: www.hughlafollette.com/eip5/).

Philosophical writing also tends to be more complex than the writings of reporters and novelists. Occasionally it is more complex than it needs to be: the author may not know how to write clearly. Sometimes the essay *seems* more complex than it really is since the author wrote decades or even centuries ago, at a time when most writers penned long, intricate sentences. You can often break down these long sentences into their component parts, for example, by treating a semicolon as a period. You may also need to reread the essay

several times to get a sense of the author's rhythm, much in the way that you may need to listen to a musician several times before you find it easy to appreciate her music and understand the lyrics.

Often, though, the writing is complex simply because the ideas expressed are complex. We cannot always render profound, complex thoughts into intellectual pabulum. The only way to grasp such essays is to generally improve one's reading skills, in large part by reading and rereading essays until you understand them.

The Centrality of Argument

Philosophical writing is complex also because it contains and evaluates arguments. Philosophers forward their own arguments and critique the arguments of others. "Arguments," in this context, have a particular philosophical meaning: An argument is a connected series of statements with a central claim the writer is trying to defend (the conclusion), supported by evidence (the premises) the author offers on behalf of the conclusion. Philosophers employ an array of evidence. They may proffer empirical data, forward imaginative examples, pose suggestions, and critique alternatives. (To better understand what arguments are and how to evaluate them, see the introductory essay "The Basics of Argumentation.") Make certain you have identified the author's conclusion and his or her premises before you evaluate their work. Do not fall into the trap of judging that an argument is flawed because you dislike the conclusion.

The human tendency to dismiss views we dislike helps explain philosophers' preoccupation with arguments. Each of us is constantly bombarded with claims. Some of these claims are true, some false. Some offer sage wisdom; some dreadful advice. How do we distinguish the true from the false, the wise from the inane – especially when the topic is a controversial moral, political, and social issue? How do we know the proper moral response to abortion, world hunger, same-sex marriage, or affirmative action? Do we just pick the one we like? The one our parents, preachers, teachers, friends, or society advocate? Often that is exactly what we do. (This is known as the confirmatory bias (Miller, R. W. 1987; Nickerson, R. S. 1998).) But we shouldn't. Even a cursory glance at history reveals that many horrendous evils were committed by those who embraced their views steadfastly and uncritically. Most Nazis, slave holders, and commanders of Russian Gulags did not think they were immoral; they assumed they were acting appropriately. They simply accepted their society's views without subjecting them to rational and moral scrutiny. That we should not do. At least not if we are responsible individuals (LaFollette, H. 2017). After all, people's lives, welfare, and happiness may depend on our decisions, and the decisions of people like us.

What is our option? We should seek conclusions supported by the best evidence. We should examine the *reasons* offered for alternative beliefs. Doing so will not insure that we make the best decision, but it will increase the odds that we do. It will lessen the possibility that we make highly objectionable decisions, decisions we will later come to regret. Philosophers offer arguments for their views to help themselves and others make better decisions.

Most people are unaccustomed to scrutinizing arguments. Since most of us were expected to believe what our parents, our priests, our teachers, and our pals told us; we are disinclined to consider opposing arguments seriously. We are not inclined to rationally criticize our own views. Moreover, although all of us have offered some arguments for our views, we have rarely done so with the care and depth that are the staples of good philosophy. Philosophers strive to offer a clear, unambiguous conclusion supported by reasons that even those disinclined to believe their conclusions are likely to find plausible. That is not to say that philosophers never make bad arguments or say stupid things. Of course we do. However, it is to say that the explicit aim of philosophy is a *clear, careful, assessment of the reasons for and against ours and others' views*. That is why a key to understanding philosophy is being able to spot arguments, and then to critique them. That is something you will learn, at least in part, by practice. It is something I explore in more detail in my introductory essay "The Basics of Argumentation."

Looking at Others' Views

Since part of the task of defending one's view is to show that it is rationally superior to alternatives, a philosopher standardly not only (a) provides arguments for their

views, he or she also (b) responds to criticisms of them, and (c) considers alternatives. Sometimes those other views and criticisms are advocated by a specific philosopher whose work the author cites. Often, though, the ideas an author discusses are not those of any particular philosopher, but rather represent the views of some hypothetical advocate of the position (e.g., conservatism or theism or pro-life). This is often double trouble for you as a student. You may be unfamiliar with the view being discussed. Therefore, you will have no way to ascertain if the view has been accurately represented; thus, you cannot judge if the criticisms (and responses to them) are telling. You may even have difficulty distinguishing the author's view from the views of those he or she discusses.

If you read the essay quickly, and without concentrating, you may be confused. However, usually use you can distinguish one view from the other if you read the essay carefully. Most authors give argumentative road signs indicating when they are defending a view and when they are stating or discussing someone else's view. Of course the student may miss these signs if they do not know what to look for. But simply knowing that this is a common strategy should make distinguishing them easier. You can also look for specific cues. For instance, philosophers discussing another's views may use the third person to indicate that someone else is speaking (or arguing). At other times the author may explicitly say something like "some may disagree …" and then go on to discuss that person's view. In other cases the signs may be more subtle. In the end there is no single or simple way to distinguish the author's view from other views the author is discussing. However, if you read the essays carefully, using the strategy just outlined, you will increase the likelihood that you will not be confused.

The Rational Consequences of What We Say

The philosopher's discussion of examples or cases – especially fictional ones – sometimes confuses students. The use of such cases, though, builds upon a central pillar of philosophical argument, namely, that we should consider the implications or rational consequences of our beliefs and actions. The following example explains what I mean. Suppose a teacher gives you an "A" because she likes you, and gives Robert – your worst enemy – an "F" because she dislikes him. You might be ecstatic that you received an "A"; you may also be thrilled to know that your worst enemy failed. However, would you say that what the teacher did was morally acceptable? No. There are implications of saying that, implications you are loathe to accept.

If you said that the teacher's *reason* for giving those grades was legitimate, you would be saying that teachers should be able to give students they like good grades and students they dislike bad grades. Thus, you would be rationally committed to holding that if one of your teachers disliked you, then they could legitimately fail you. That, of course, is a consequence you are unwilling to accept. Therefore, you (and we) have reason to suspect that your original acceptance of the teacher's grading scheme was inappropriate. This is a common argumentative strategy. Trace the implications – the rational consequences – of a person's *reasons* for action, and then see if you (or others) would be willing to accept those consequences. If the answer is "No," then the original reasons are dubious.

A Final Word

These suggestions will not make reading philosophical essays easy. My hope, though, is that they will make it easier. In the end the key to success is practice. If you have never read philosophical arguments before, you are unlikely to be able to glance at the essay and understand it: you will likely miss the central idea, its relation to alternatives, and you will almost certainly fail to comprehend the author's argument. To fully understand the essay, you must read the assignment carefully and more than once. Most essays are too difficult in style and content for you to grasp in a single reading. Not even most professional philosophers can do that.

Here is a good strategy: read the essay once. Identify confusing or unusual terms. Try to get a general sense of the argument: what is the point the author wants to establish, what reason do they offer for this claim? What arguments does the author discuss? Identify the points about which you are still unclear. After you have a general sense of the essay, reread it again more

carefully. Strive for a thorough understanding of the argument. Come to class prepared to ask the teacher to clarify any remaining confusion about the author's views. If you are accustomed to reading an assignment once – and then only quickly – this expectation will seem overly demanding. Yet, it is important that you learn to read carefully and critically.

Herein lies the key to success: persistence and practice. There may be times you find the reading so difficult that you will be tempted to stop, to wait for the instructor to explain it. Yield not to temptation. Press on. It is better and more rewarding to understand the reading for yourself. Think, for a moment, about what happens when someone "explains" a joke that you could (with time and effort) have understood on your own. It spoils the joke.

Learning to read more complex essays is a skill, and, like any skill, it is not acquired all at once or without effort. Nothing in life that is valuable is acquired effortlessly. Getting into physical shape requires vigorous exercise and more than a little perspiration. Establishing and maintaining a vibrant relationship requires effort, understanding, and sacrifice. Learning to play a musical instrument does not come quickly (if at all), and is, at times, exceedingly frustrating.

Learning to read sophisticated essays is no different. If you persist, however, you will find that with time it becomes easier to read and understand philosophical essays. The payoff is substantial and enduring. You will better understand the day's reading assignment, which will most assuredly improve your grade. But more importantly, you will also expand your vocabulary and improve your reading comprehension. You will increase your ability to understand more complex and significant writing. Most of the world's great books are inaccessible to those with minimal reading and argumentative skills. Learning to read methodically, critically, and in depth will expand your mental horizons. It will increase your understanding of others' views. It will enhance your ability to refine and defend your own views.

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Writing a Philosophy Paper

Having read the introductory section on "Reading Philosophy" and your initial course readings, you have doubtless inferred that although writing a philosophy paper resembles writing papers for other classes, doing so also differs in significant ways from most papers you have written to date. They are similar insofar as all require you to have mastered basic writing skills. You need a robust yet subtle vocabulary; you should have mastered important grammatical rules and the basics of punctuation; you need to write clear and precise sentences; you should organize sentences into coherent paragraphs; you should arrange paragraphs so that the reader can follow your exposition or argument.

Despite these commonalities, philosophical essays differ from those in other academic disciplines inasmuch as their aims, styles, and vocabularies differ. Philosophy papers are not standardly research papers: you will not merely catalogue what this or that philosopher said about a particular topic. Nor are philosophy papers opinion pieces in which you merely state your view. Most professors require you to *evaluate* texts or the author's ideas; typically you must defend these ideas. Finally, philosophers may use unfamiliar words and use familiar words in unfamiliar ways.

Of course not all papers required by all philosophy professors are identical. They will vary between introductory and upper division courses. They are often shorter early in the term and more substantial late in the term, after you have become more familiar with philosophical ideas. Of course to have a chance at writing a good essay, you must be attuned to your professor's specific requirements. Despite this variation, there are common forms of philosophical essays; I offer some guidance on how to write the most familiar ones.

The Most Common Types

Expository papers

Sometimes, especially early in a course, your professor may ask you to write an expository paper. In it you will identify the author's central claim or thesis in the essay or book chapter (hereafter, just "essay") – the bottom line that the author wants you to believe. Then you must identify their reasons for that thesis. Finally, you should explain why the author thinks the reasons support her thesis.

It is tempting to think that an expository paper is merely a summary of what the author said. It is not. You cannot just go through the essay, listing ideas the author discusses or evaluates. Not every element of an essay is equally important in explaining the author's thesis or supporting argument. To write a good expository paper you must distinguish what is central from what is peripheral.

Moreover, sometimes a good expository paper will not present the author's ideas in the same order in which he or she did. In some essays, the thesis is stated at the beginning and the reasons for that thesis come later. In others, it may be stated at the end and be preceded by the premises; though not as commonly, the thesis may be somewhere in the middle of the essay, with some premises before the conclusion and some after it – in particular if the author expressly considers likely objections to their view. You must extract the essay's essence and explain it so that someone who has not read the original essay can, by reading your paper, broadly grasp what the author said. You cannot do that after reading the essay once. You will have to read it

multiple times, underline key ideas, and make notes. Then you should present the author's thesis and evidence in ways that are as charitable as possible, making the thesis and supporting argument as clear and as appealing as you can.

There are two principal reasons your professor may ask you to write an expository paper. One, he or she wants you to understand the ideas and reasoning of important thinkers, the structure of influential arguments. Two, a careful exposition of the author's views is a prerequisite for evaluating those views. All too often we quickly read and may dismiss an author's thesis simply because we do not like it. That is never a good reason to reject a thesis. We must look at the reasons the author offers for the thesis, and decide if their evidence is true or at least plausible, and whether its truth gives us reason to embrace that thesis.

Critical papers

More commonly, your professor will ask you to write a critical paper. Many people assume that a criticism is some form of condemnation of the author's (or speaker's) views. However, the term "critical" here simply means "evaluative." Evaluations can be positive as well as negative.

The precise nature of these papers varies. So heed the express directions of your professor. Generally, there are three types of critical papers, with the last two being more common.

Compare and contrast

Some professors may ask you to "compare and contrast" the ideas of two or more authors. In so doing, the professor is *not* asking you for a research paper, nor is he or she asking for an expository paper. You cannot fulfill this requirement by submitting essentially two expository papers combined into one. The task is more critical (evaluative). To compare and contrast two views you must first understand each. Having understood them, you must then identify the ways in which the authors' views are similar and different. They may vary in numerous ways. Perhaps the most common are the following: They might reach different conclusions, either because their premises are different (e.g., Marquis and Little on abortion) or because they evaluate more or less similar evidence differently (e.g., LaFollette and Hunt on gun control). Or they may reach the same conclusion in different ways. One might be a consequentialist and the other a deontologist (see the introduction "Theorizing about Ethics"). These theoretical differences lead Singer and Pogge to reach similar views about world hunger in very different ways, while leading Warren and Little to reach roughly similar views on abortion in different ways.

Criticizing a view

Some professors will ask (or permit) you to evaluate a single author's views. This is a two-step process. First, you must do what you would do in an expository paper: you must identify the author's thesis (conclusion) and the premises and then show how the author thinks these premises support the conclusion. Second, you must evaluate their view in one of these three ways: (a) you can explain why you find the premises false (or true) or at least not obviously true (obviously false); (b) you can explain why the premises are (or are not) relevant to the conclusion (something you will find, upon reading many of the essays, is sometimes difficult to establish); or (c) you will explain why the premises, if true, are sufficient (insufficient) to guarantee the truth of the conclusion. I will say more about each of these steps in the following section, and in the essay "The Basics of Argumentation."

Defending your own view

To defend your own view, you need a thesis, a succinct statement (standardly a single sentence) of your view. It should be simple, clear, and unambiguous: "I support the legalization of physician assisted suicide;" "I contend that the recreational use of marijuana, but no other currently banned drugs, should be decriminalized;" "I oppose the legalization of gay marriage;" "Like Hardin, I think we have no obligation to feed starving people in the world; indeed, doing so is positively immoral." I often encourage a student to underline their thesis. In doing so you inform your readers of the view you hold; thus, the readers will better know how to interpret your other claims. It also reminds you, while you are writing your paper, what your thesis is. Every sentence in your paper should either elucidate or defend that thesis. If it does not, you should discard that sentence.

To defend your thesis, you should employ the principles mentioned in the previous section, as well as the

introductions on "Reading Philosophy" and "The Basics of Argumentation." First, the evidence you offer for your thesis should be true or highly plausible. If the evidence is questionable, then offer a secondary argument supporting the truth of the main premises. Second, show *how* the truth of these premises would support the truth of the conclusion. If there is uncertainty about the relevance of the premises, offer a secondary argument *showing that* they are relevant. This might seem to be a rare concern. It is actually quite common. Many practical issues – for example, abortion (does it morally matter that the zygote is genetically human?) and capital punishment (does it matter morally if executing some criminals saves money?) – hinge on disagreements about proffered premises' relevance. Third, you should show that the premises are *sufficient* to support the conclusion. For example, most mammals feel pain and have at least rudimentary emotions. This seems relevant to questions about how we should treat them (few people think it is legitimate to peel off a conscious dog's skin for fun). Nonetheless, people dispute whether this evidence is sufficient to show that animal experimentation or eating animals is morally impermissible in ordinary circumstances. So you may need secondary arguments showing that your evidence is sufficient.

It is not enough, however, to just provide a positive argument for your view; you must also show why it is superior to *plausible* alternatives. To do that, you have to first explain these alternatives much as you would in an expository paper. As in those papers, you must be fair to these positions. Do not find the wackiest proponent of opposing views or describe the views in ways that no sane person would embrace. If you do, you commit the Straw Man Fallacy. Even a weakling can whip a straw man; that is not a significant accomplishment. It is a significant achievement to best an attractive statement of the opposing position.

This way of describing the process might suggest that philosophical thinking and writing are highfalutin rhetorical debates where the aim of each side is to win. It is not. The aim is to seek truth (Mill, J. S. 1985/1885: chapter 1). To do that we must find the view that is the most rationally defensible. It may be that after careful deliberation our view is, in fact, superior to alternatives. Often we discover that our own views are flawed in whole or in part.

Writing

We cannot write a good expository or critical paper without significant writing skills: a robust vocabulary, the ability to properly use grammar and punctuation, the talent to compose clear, precise, and engaging sentences, the craft to organize sentences into a coherent paragraph, and the knowledge of how to organize those paragraphs into a clear expository or critical paper. I find that is not obvious to a number of students, since some previous teachers did not explain the importance of each skill, nor did they help students learn how to improve their writing. So let me say a bit about each element and suggest some ways each of us can improve our writing.

Vocabulary

Most of us were not asked or expected to systematically expand our vocabularies once we left middle (and perhaps even elementary) school. Still, most of us continued to learn new words, even if less systematically. We found we could often discern the meaning of a new word by its context. Then some teachers would occasionally introduce the meanings of words in their classes, either in a lecture or in response to students' questions. They encouraged us to look up the meaning of words we did not know. Unfortunately, I suspect that most of us ignored that prudent advice; hence, our vocabularies are less rich than they could and should be. I know mine is.

This dampens our understanding of the views forwarded by others, and limits our ability to clearly and persuasively forward our own views. If we read an essay where we do not know the meaning of key terms, then we will not understand, or even worse, incorrectly think we do understand, what the author says. To communicate effectively with others, we must choose our words carefully. Unfortunately, we are often insufficiently attentive to words' precise meanings; hence, we use the wrong word. This happens in three ways. One, having heard others use a word, we surmise what it means from the context. It is just that we infer mistakenly. So we subsequently use the word in the wrong way or in the wrong context. Two, sometimes we go further and commit a *category mistake*. We use a word in a way that is not merely inappropriate; in context it does not make sense. If I said "The octagon dances," or "The table believes," I am uttering gibberish. Octagons are

not the *kinds of things* than can dance (or not dance); tables are not the *kinds of things* that can hold beliefs. These are paradigm examples of category mistakes. These examples are obvious, so obvious that we might assume that people rarely (or never) commit a category mistake. Unfortunately, that is not so. We are especially prone to this error when we are acquiring a new vocabulary. If one is not familiar with the technical use of words like "arguments" or "premises" or "evidence," one might mistakenly use them in inappropriate ways ("the argument is true" or "the evidence is valid"). Three, we sometimes think that since our thesaurus identifies two words as synonyms, then we can use the words interchangeably. Not so. The differences between them may seem minor, yet are often sufficiently significant that using one word rather than the other distorts what we try to say. For instance, there are a variety of adjectives we can use to describe objectionable behavior: unkind, insensitive, untoward, inappropriate, tacky, short-sighted, uncouth, or mean-spirited. Although these words each identify some flawed behavior, they are not identical. It might be appropriate to describe some morally objectionable behavior as "tacky" but not "short-sighted" or "insensitive" but not "mean-spirited." We should say what we mean.

Vagueness and ambiguity

Sometimes we use words that are inexact in context, and thus fail to express ourselves clearly. Often that happens because our writing is either *vague* or *ambiguous*. Sometimes we treat these concepts as synonyms; they are not. They are two wholly different forms of imprecision, and thus, the ways to resolve them differ.

Vagueness

A word or phrase is *vague* in context if there are a range of related possible meanings, and, in that context, we need a more precise word. Most words are potentially inexact: tall, smart, close, long, ignorant, risky, challenging, etc. In many contexts these words are precise enough to communicate. If I describe myself to someone who will meet me at the airport as "a tall fellow with the reddish-graying hair and a mostly gray beard," I have been precise enough. Although I *could* make the claim more exact by saying that I am 6'3, saying that I am tall is precise enough. However, to say that living in a house with *high* radon gas in the basement is *dangerous* is doubly vague. I would want a specific reading (ideally lower than two parts per million), and evidence about precisely how the measured levels will increase my and my family's chances of developing lung cancer. It is not always easy to detect vague words or phrases. We must be attentive to language.

Ambiguity

Ambiguous words or phrases are inexact in a context if they can be interpreted in two or more *distinct* ways. There are two forms of ambiguity: semantic, where the ambiguity stems from two or more distinct meanings of some word, and syntactic, where the ambiguity arises from the grammatical structure of the sentence. The word "good" has two distinct meanings. Often it reflects our moral evaluation of someone or their actions. Sometimes, though, it simply means something akin to "efficient." Thus, in calling someone a "good assassin" we are not claiming that he or she is morally praiseworthy, only that the person is very effective at killing those he or she is hired to kill – and normally can escape detection and prosecution. If a word has multiple distinct meanings (and many words do), we should make sure that the proper meaning is discernible from the context.

A word or phrase is *syntactically* ambiguous if the grammatical structure yields two distinct meanings. To call someone a "Chinese historian" is ambiguous; the syntax makes it unclear if she is an ethically Chinese historian or if she is an historian specializing in Chinese history. It is not always so easy to detect ambiguous uses. We must be attentive to language and context.

Grammar and punctuation

Rules of grammar and punctuation might seem tangential to writing a philosophical paper. If they do, it is probably because we identify grammar with a silly set of rules our elementary school teachers pounded into us. We don't realize that proper grammar is not just blindly following rules that some rigid English prof devised; grammar and punctuation can change the meaning of what we say. The most reputable elements of each were developed to enhance clarity and precision. An example of where punctuation alters meaning made the rounds on Facebook several years ago: "Let's eat, Grandma." The comma here is not just an idle mark on the page; its

absence changes an invitation to Grandma into a call to engage in familial cannibalism. Commas in some cases alter the meaning of sentences; in others, they are clues to the reader about how a sentence is best parsed and understood. The period (or full stop) signals the end of a sentence, and is a basic marker for precise and expressive writing.

Rules of grammar don't just serve to indicate social class (don't split infinitives or use contractions), although adhering to these rules sometimes seems to serve little more than that purpose. Grammar, like punctuation, changes meaning. One of the clearest examples is the avoidance of ambiguous referents to pronouns, or what are often classed as dangling modifiers. Suppose someone said: "Susan called Katie every day she was ill." The problem is that we don't know whether "she" refers to Susan or to Katie, and thus, we are unsure who was ill. The dangling modifier makes this sentence syntactically ambiguous.

Finally, I mention one example of word placement because it is not only common; it is extremely hard to spot: the placement of the word "only." I have found that most students are likely to plop "only" in the wrong place. Its placement, though, is anything but trivial. There is a profound difference between "I love only you," and "I only love you." The former expresses my unique affection for you; the second leaves open, and may even imply, that I do not like you. The former you may say to the love of your life; the second you might say to (or more likely, about) a cousin you help simply because she is your cousin, even if you don't particularly want to be around her.

Writing clear, compelling sentences

Sentences, not words, are the primary vehicles of linguistic meaning. Although most words have standard meanings, their meaning can vary depending on where we place them in a sentence. Additionally, the meaning of a sentence depends upon its context. If your roommate says, "BRRR, I'm cold," she may be just reporting how she feels. More likely she is asking you if she can turn on the heat or turn down the air conditioner. The sentence is not straightforwardly an imperative. However, in context it often is a request for action. Or if, during a family get-together, Uncle Ralph starts criticizing the current president or prime minister and your mother says "The weather is lovely today," no competent speaker will assume that she is making a comment about the weather. She is telling Ralph – and everyone else at the table – to avoid talking politics. To understand what someone says we must attend to context.

We must also seek to write the clearest, most succinct sentences. A normal sentence has a noun and a verb and is frequently populated with adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, dependent and independent clauses, gerunds, participles, and so on. However, not every grammatically complete sentence is effective or even comprehensible. To write more effectively we must understand why too many of us tend to write weak sentences; then we must work to avoid these tendencies. A sentence is ineffective if it has a flawed grammatical structure, employs inappropriate or superfluous words, is unnecessarily complex, or is unclear. Most people want to be clear; often they just don't know how. It is not usual for writers to think that they are clear even when they patently are not. An author may lack a grasp of grammar or have a deficient vocabulary; more commonly, he or she may be insufficiently attentive to the subtleties of language.

There are four common causes of weak sentences beyond the grammatical errors mentioned earlier. One, writers reuse words they read even though they do not know precisely what those words mean, or when and how they are used appropriately. Two, writers often use unnecessary words. These bloat a sentence; they can make its meaning murky. Some common bulky phrases are: "the question as to whether" rather than "whether;" "his story is a strange one" rather than "his strange story (overuse of "one")," and "owing to the fact that" rather than "because." Over the years I have noted that a familiar source of muddled writing is the overuse of prepositional phrases. Often they require extraneous words: for example, "acts of a benevolent nature" rather than "benevolent acts." Most essays with ponderous prose (e.g., legal documents) are infused with prepositional phrases. Of course we need these linguistic devices sometimes and in some circumstances. However, they are too often overused. As you are revising your papers, trim unnecessary ones.

Three, we often resort to weak nouns (say, "one"); and then try to strengthen them by piling on descriptive adjectives; or we use weak verbs (especially forms

of "to be" or "to do") and then try to strengthen them with adverbs. This propensity is especially confusing if we also overuse prepositional phrases or dependent clauses. For instance, we say "one of the educated citizens in our state," rather than "an educated citizen." Or we say, that "he did act in an extremely and in a pervasively antagonistic way" rather than "the antagonistic man" or "he was antagonistic." There is no recipe for purging cumbersome wording. The best we can do is be aware of this propensity, and, while revising, excise unnecessary words, and, when feasible, look for stronger, more precise, nouns and verbs.

Four, the best writing usually uses the active voice: you have a strong subject and a strong verb, e.g., "Joan jogged ten miles," rather than "Ten miles was run by Joan." In the former sentence, the agent is the subject, the action is the verb, and the "recipient" of the action ("ten miles") is the indirect object of the sentence. In the example using the passive voice, what is normally the indirect object becomes the grammatical subject, and the agent becomes the indirect object, often as the object of a prepositional phrase. This is not to say that we should never use the passive voice. It is sometimes a valuable tool, if, for no other reason, than to provide some variety. Nonetheless, our writing is stronger if an agent is *normally* the subject of our sentences and the agent's action is captured by strong, precise verbs.

What I am proposing clashes with what you were doubtless taught in most social science courses. Many social scientists loathe the active voice, and will deduct points if you deign to use the first person "I." They prefer "the subjects were studied" or "an analysis was conducted" to "we studied" or "I analyzed." To them, the latter sound less objective. I find these proposed locutions cumbersome and unclear. I want to know "who did the study?" and "who analyzed the data"? From the original sentences, we cannot tell. Even so, academic prudence dictates that you follow their rules for writing papers in their classes. Just understand that that is not what you will be expected to do in a philosophy paper. You will be offering an exposition, comparing and contrasting views, criticizing someone else's view, or offering and defending your own view. In these papers, you should own your words. That normally requires using the first person.

Writing coherent and compelling paragraphs

Writing a series of cogent sentences is insufficient for writing an effective paper. You must also be able to arrange your sentences into coherent paragraphs. Each paragraph should present an important element of your paper. It may explain some feature of the author's views, identify one of his or her unstated assumptions, offer a defense of a crucial premise of your argument, describe a potential objection to your view, or respond to that objection. Each sentence of the paragraph should flow seamlessly from the previous one and into the following one, so that your reader will be able to understand your point without having to stop abruptly after each sentence. You don't want your reader to struggle to understand you.

Organizing paragraphs into a well-organized paper

Just as you don't want your readers to struggle in discerning the movement from sentence to sentence, you also don't want them struggling to see the connection of ideas as they unfold in subsequent paragraphs. Ideally the last sentence of each paragraph should transition effortlessly into the first sentence of the following one.

In addition to insuring that my argument is persuasive, I find this is the most difficult part of writing. Not only must we strive to make smooth transitions between paragraphs, we need to order them so that the reader can grasp the point we want to make – and why we want to make it. That requires deciding which information we should present first, which next, and so on.

There's a trick I stumbled on some years ago that (I think) helped me write more clearly, succinctly, and forcefully. Unlike many writers, I do not typically make an outline before writing a paper. I often sit down and let the ideas flow onto my computer screen.

That doesn't mean that I never find outlines valuable. I do. Just not in the ways most people use them, at the time most people use them. After I have revised a paper numerous times until I no longer see ways to improve it, I *then* make an outline. I do not outline what I wanted to say, or what I thought I said. Rather I outline what I actually wrote. This is more difficult than you might imagine, because it is tempting to interpret my words on the page to fit with what I (thought I)

wanted to say. This process requires brutal honesty. What did I actually say, how did I say it, and in what order did I say it?

In making this outline, I lay bare the paper's structure: I invariably spot holes in the argument, gaps in the exposition, unnecessary repetitions, and diversions. I see points I need to clarity or others I need to add. I make notes on the outline using Word's comment feature. Then I print the outline. I find having a hard copy is valuable. As I carefully read it, I see errors I missed when it was merely on my computer. I may find I am trying to make three main points, even if they are disjointed. I may identify three subsidiary points, several of which should be relocated. I scribble notes and draw arrows all over my hard copy until I have cut and reorganized enough so that I am happy with the result – or until my paper is so marked up that I no longer have room to add anything else. Then I redo my electronic copy of the outline to match the marked up physical copy. I use that revised electronic outline to revise my paper. Typically I create a split screen with the outline on one side, and the full paper on the other.

When rewriting the next version, I use the outline to see where I should add signposts for the reader. It often helps to add major headings, and perhaps some subheadings. These make the structure of the paper perspicuous to your readers – and to yourself. They make it easier for the reader to follow your exposition or argument. They help keep me focused on what I want to say to ensure that the paper is clearly organized.

Revise, Revise, Revise

Most of us are prone to write quickly and then do not revise our work at all, or at least not extensively – especially when we feel pressed for time. Unless you are an unusually apt writer, this is a recipe for academic disaster. The only way we become better writers is to practice. That is how we acquire and refine any skill, whether it be typing, shooting a basketball, or learning to play the guitar. The best way to practice writing is to repeatedly revise our papers before we finally submit them. Revision has an immediate and a long-term benefit. The immediate benefit is spotting and filling gaps, making our exposition more precise, and bolstering or clarifying our arguments.

Arguably the most important benefit, though, is long term. If we are attentive when revising our papers, we are better able to identify our writing tics. We discover that we overuse prepositional phrases or conjunctions ("but," "however," "although," etc.), are too reliant on the passive voice, or tend to use weak nouns and verbs. After a while, we come to spot these errors as we write, not after the fact. Eventually, the first versions of our papers will be clearer, more precise, and more forceful. It will take fewer revisions to end up with a clear, coherent paper.

Learning from Others

All of us can improve our writing. One effective strategy is to identify people who are stellar writers and carefully read what they have written. By exposing ourselves to them, we begin to notice, sometime subconsciously, *how* to select the right work, to organize them into strong sentences, to structure clear and coherent paragraphs, and to assemble an engaging, interesting essay. We can learn from reading both good fiction and non-fiction, although we should be attuned to the differences between them.

Finally, we can learn from others who write about good writing. However, be careful. I have found some books on "how to write" are badly written and give little prudent advice. However, I have found two that are clear and helpful. The first is *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. This gem has been around for more than half a century. Strunk was White's college English professor, and his advice clearly influenced White, best known as the author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*.

The second book is *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by the late Joseph Williams (Williams, J. M. and Bizup, J. 2013). There is a briefer version, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, which was initially written by Williams; one of his admirers, Gregory Colomb, has been revising it since Williams's death (2011). The shorter volume includes most points I find valuable in the longer one – and it is cheaper. I have read and reread both books numerous times; each time I find some forgotten or overlooked nuggets of wisdom. Many of the ideas here are drawn from these sources

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The Basics of Argumentation

An argument is a series of sentences or claims, in which the conclusion is the speaker's or author's (hereafter, just "the author") core claim; the argument's premises are the evidence they offer in support of that conclusion.

An argument is strong if the premises are a) true or highly plausible, and if the premises are both b) *relevant to* and c) *adequate for* the conclusion. If there is serious doubt whether any of these criteria are satisfied, the author should explain why he or she thinks they are. Otherwise, the argument is flawed.

A fully developed argument for a controversial moral or public policy claim involves an overarching argument (the conclusion about which policy we should have) buttressed by a series of sub-arguments. Some sub-arguments seek to show that a premise is true or at least highly plausible; others try to establish that and how a premise is relevant to the conclusion; still others seek to demonstrate that the premises are individually or collectively sufficient to support that conclusion. It is rarely easy to show that the premises are true, relevant, or sufficient; it is even more difficult to establish that all three criteria are satisfied. Each element of an argument may be contentious. All elements are crucial if the author wants a forceful, plausible, reasonable defense of her view. Let me explain why.

It is obvious why one's premises must be true or plausible. Premises are the footing upon which the author constructs their argument. If the premises are false or seriously debatable, then the conclusion lacks firm support. The conclusion might happen to be true. However, an argument with dubious premises gives us no reason for thinking that it is.

How does one defend the truth of a premise? There is no simple answer to this question. To provide even the start of an answer requires a significant detour into practical reasoning and the theory of knowledge. Nonetheless, I can provide some brief direction about how to defend the truth of a premise. First, the way of establishing a premise's truth depends in significant measure on the premise's nature. If it is an empirical element of a concrete moral debate (e.g., a claim that capital punishment deters a significant number of potential murderers, that westerners caused swaths of world poverty, that women make less money than men in comparable jobs, that children of gay couples flourish as well as those of heterosexual couples, etc.), then the evidence for said premise must be partly empirical. It has to rest on meticulously assembled data. When possible, it should be supported by well-designed, properly executed, and sensibly interpreted studies. One can reasonably decide if a study or data are reliable only if one has the relevant background information.

Other premises may be definitions of key terms. If these premises are to be plausible, the definition(s) should make sense and be consistent with common uses of the term; inasmuch as the current use deviates from common usage, the author should explain why he or she contends the proposed definition is not just acceptable but preferable. Still other premises will be moral claims about what is valuable, about what we should do, about the kinds of virtues we should inculcate, and so on. These premises might be supported by appealing to widely accepted moral principles, by showing how the premise follows from some well-developed and comprehensive moral theory, or perhaps by drawing an analogy that helps us clearly identify the morally relevant features of the action we are discussing.

What about the relevance criterion? The rationale for this requirement is fairly uncontroversial. If a premise is irrelevant to the conclusion then, even if it were true, it cannot support that conclusion. A square has four sides. However, this true claim provides no reason for thinking that capital punishment is wrong or that abortion is morally permissible. The claims have nothing to do with one another. In this case, the gap between the premise and the conclusion is obvious. However, in complex moral and public policy debates, determining if a premise is relevant is often far more difficult than we might suppose.

We can "get it wrong" both ways: we might think some factor is relevant when it is not; we might think some factor is not relevant when it is. That is why I find this criterion is the most difficult of the three to judge. The former option is quite common once we notice that a premise may be *about* the issue under discussion yet still be wholly *irrelevant* to the conclusion – some claim about how the issue should be judged or resolved. Let's take the analogy with home building, although the windows and doors are part of the house, they have nothing directly to do with the choice of roofing materials (tile, asphalt shingles, metal, etc.) They are not obviously relevant to that aspect of building a house.

Conversely, we might not immediately see that some information or principle *is* relevant to the conclusion, when, in fact, it is highly relevant. We lack the requisite imagination or background information. However, once someone explains that, why, and how the information is relevant, what was initially mysterious becomes crystal clear.

We can see the difficulties in contentious debates over many moral issues, for example, capital punishment or abortion or world hunger or sexual harassment. Those embracing different perspectives in a debate may rely upon premises that other advocates may deem irrelevant. When that happens, disputants talk past one another; they never really join issue because they cannot agree about what is, or is not, relevant. How can this happen?

There are two fairly common reasons why we might think some claim or fact is relevant even when, in fact, it is not. One occurs when people offer historical details about the issue and suggest that these support their particular view. However, if it is relevant, the advocate needs to explain why and how it is. Without such explanation, the history of the debate is usually irrelevant. Students have a difficult time understanding this. They often use historical details to try to support their positions. They may, for instance, note that many societies throughout history have employed capital punishment, and proclaim that this shows that capital punishment is morally justified. Or they recount the US Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, and try to assert that this supports certain arguments for the legalization (or restriction) of abortion. These respective histories are clearly *about* capital punishment and *about* abortion. To that extent, the histories are relevant *to the topic*. However, that does not straightforwardly make them relevant to any particular claim about the rightness of wrongness of the respective practice. The historical usage of capital punishment is simply irrelevant to the thesis that we should continuing using it. At least it is irrelevant without further explanation. Perhaps there is some yet unspecified sub-argument that explains why, contrary to first appearances, it can support the practice. However, the most common unstated assumption is that the past use of a practice is evidence for continuing that practice. However, that assumption is dubious. There are myriad former practices (slavery, Jim Crow, depriving women of the right to vote, barring interracial marriage) that almost everyone now acknowledges were wrong. Therefore, it cannot be that the historical use of a practice is a compelling reason to continue it. It may be a reason to consider using it. However, since there already seem to be some compelling reasons to morally consider this practice, then this historical argument gives advocates no additional support to their claim.

The second way in which a premise about a topic may fail to be relevant to the conclusion of an argument about the topic is when the premise's scope is narrower than the conclusion's. This happens surprisingly often in public discussion of moral issues. Suppose someone argues that abortion should be illegal from the moment of conception. Not uncommonly, such a person will then offer certain facts about fetal development to defend their conclusion. She or her may, for example, note the fetus has a heartbeat at 10 weeks or becomes viable at 24 weeks. These facts indubitably *concern* abortion. However, they are *irrelevant* to the thesis that abortion should always be illegal. Here's why.

Facts about fetal development *might* be relevant to assessing the appropriateness of abortions performed after the specified points of fetal development. However, the stated thesis is about abortion *at any point* after conception, including the time before viability or before the fetus has a heart, let alone a heartbeat. The scope of the thesis is broader; it concerns all abortions. The premises concern, at most, a subset of abortions. Thus, the claims, even if true, would not lend *any* support to the broader thesis. That does not show that there is no argument that could support that thesis, only that *this* argument will not do the trick. Consider the non-moral analogy: showing that red-headed USFSP (University of South Florida, St Petersburg) students have nasty temperaments tells us nothing about the dispositions of all (or even most) USFSP students.

Notice, though, that I said these premises *as stated* are irrelevant to the conclusion. That implies that there is some argumentative wiggle room. These points might be relevant. If the author thinks they are, he or she should explain why, despite their narrowness, these claims support the broader thesis. That would require adding premises and showing how and why these reveal that the original claims are relevant to the thesis. How exactly this might go in the above cases is far from clear. My points are simply that, a) without additional premises, the proffered premises are irrelevant to the stated thesis even though they are related to the topic, and b) with the right premises, what appeared to be irrelevant might turn out to be relevant.

However, the issue of scope is sometimes misleading. Consider the argument often used against capital punishment: that some innocent people are executed. Using the previous discussion, someone might claim that this cannot be a general argument against the death penalty, since the scope of this claim, even if true, is narrower (those innocents who are executed) than the scope of the conclusion (all people who are executed). From this perspective, this premise does not appear to be relevant to the conclusion; certainly they do not seem to be decisive.

As it turns out, there *is* a plausible explanation for its relevance. Two, actually. One, we can assume that the state does not intentionally execute guilty people. So the state thinks everyone they execute is guilty. They assume none are innocent. It is just that they are wrong. The problem this objection raises is that the state can never be confident in advance. Thus, *for all they know*, the person could be innocent, and, if they proceed, they may execute an innocent person. The only way to be certain that you never execute an innocent person is to never execute anyone. To that extent the objection seems to have appropriate scope.

Two, executing an innocent person is arguably so morally wrong that the mere chance that it would happen is a reason to abolish capital punishment. The idea is familiar. When a policy could have morally catastrophic effects, then we have at least *a reason* to decide not to take that risk. There may be only a slight chance that bungie jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge will kill me. Perhaps someone thinks the rush is worth the risk. However, since the outcome is so negative, then even though it is slight, that gives a prudent person *a reason* for not bungie jumping off that bridge. Perhaps it is not sufficient; it certainly seems relevant. In the same vein, the extreme wrongness of killing an innocent person gives us at least some reason to question the legitimacy of the practice.

Why require that the premises be sufficient to support the conclusion? Simple. Having *a* reason to think that some behavior is permissible, forbidden, or required does not yet show that it *is* permissible, forbidden, or required. Think about it for a second. We can usually concoct *some* reason for virtually any behavior, no matter how noxious. That would include completely incompatible claims (we should and should not have capital punishment; we have and do not have an obligation to feed the starving; etc.). What matters is whether we have *enough* reason to think *on balance* that we should do some action, implement some policy, or cultivate some virtue. Moral choices are rarely completely black and white (although some may come close). Most are comparative. We have to have a sense not only that the reasons for doing X are good, but that they are better than the reasons for not doing X.

As we noticed in the previous discussion, the fact that innocent people are sometimes executed is, despite first appearances, relevant to the moral defensibility of capital punishment. Now, we have to judge just how morally weighty this consideration is. In particular, is it potentially sufficient to show that we should not have capital punishment? At least one federal judge, who used to support the death penalty, thinks the answer is

"yes" (Rakoff, J. S., 2017). Whether he is correct, is another matter. However, this judge understands that it is not obviously sufficient. The entire thrust of his 2017 article is to explain why it is. The impulse is correct: if a premise (or a group of premises) is not obviously sufficient, then the person who claims it is must show that and why it is.

In sum, we can always pose three questions about any argument, either our own or someone else's:

1 Are the premises true?
2 Are they relevant?
3 Are they sufficient?

Knowing this helps us focus our deliberative energy.

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Part I

Theory

Ethical Theory

In "Theorizing about Ethics," I briefly outlined the most prominent ethical theories. In this section, I include essays elaborating and defending the "big three": "Consequentialism," "Deontology," and "Virtue Theory." I also include an essay discussing "Rights." Rights are usually associated with deontology, but more than a few consequentialists also appeal to rights. You will find that a number of the authors in this volume expressly discuss rights; having a better sense of what rights are will make it easier to understand their essays.

William Shaw elucidates the standard consequentialist view: we should act in ways that we reasonably predict will maximize the best overall consequences. Of course, unseen circumstances may lead even the best informed and intentioned actions to have less than stellar consequences. However, the aim of a moral theory is to be action guiding, and our actions cannot be rationally guided by information we do not have and cannot be expected to have.

This theory reflects elements of most people's understanding of morality. We clearly see concern with consequences at work in both essays on Capital Punishment (does it deter?). It is also explicitly employed in the discussion of cloning (Biomedical Technologies) and by Singer in his discussions of Global Justice and Animals. Consequentialism also influences other authors' thinking, in less explicit ways. Gardiner on the Environment and Wright, et al. in Punishment evaluate the effects of various actions and policies without specifically using utilitarian language.

To explore the subtleties of the theory, Shaw explains and responds to a variety of questions about and objections to consequentialism. These discussions are instrumental in articles discussing several particular practical issues in this volume. For instance, a familiar criticism of consequentialism is that it is too demanding: that under most conditions, it requires agents to make significant sacrifices of their own well-being in the quest to produce the best consequences. This criticism takes center stage in Arthur's criticism of Singer's claim that we are morally obligated to help the poor of the world (Global Justice). Shaw explains why he thinks this objection to consequentialism is not telling. He thinks consequentialists have ready explanations for why their theory is not as stringent as Arthur avers, even if it is more stringent than the theory Arthur advocates.

A second (related) criticism of utilitarianism is that it does not morally distinguish omissions from actions. According to most deontological theories, there is a critical moral difference between harms we perpetrate and harms we permit to happen. This challenge is explicitly discussed (and rejected) by Pojman (Punishment). A variant of this criticism is used by Husak to criticize current drug laws (Paternalism and Risk). Shaw's response to this objection appears in a variety of ways throughout the second half of his essay.

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McNaughton and Rawling explain the second major ethical theory: deontology. They identify three key features of these theories: options, constraints, and special relationships. Deontologists claim that individuals sometimes have options to pursue their own projects and interests, even if they thereby fail to promote the good (a view explicitly endorsed by Arthur in GLOBAL JUSTICE). They also claim that individuals are morally constrained from harming others, even if in so doing they could thereby promote a greater good. Often this idea is expressed in the language of rights: that individuals have rights that limit what can legitimately be done to them, no matter what the benefits (or costs) to others. This notion, expressly developed by Rainbolt, plays a central role in many issues we discuss, for example, Velleman (EUTHANASIA), Thomson (ABORTION), Reagan (ANIMALS), Hughes and Hunt (PATERNALISM AND RISK), Altman (FREE SPEECH), and Cohen (ECONOMIC JUSTICE).

Despite these commonalities, deontologists disagree about exactly which constraints and options we have, to whom they apply, and precisely how strong they are. For instance, Hawk argues that the moral constraints against killing others are absolute. That is why he thinks war is never morally permissible. Clearly most deontologists disagree. To that extent, they deny that constraints are absolute. If constraints are not absolute, then deontologists should explain precisely when other moral considerations, say, the consequences of our actions, can override constraints against killing, truth-telling, and so on.

Other deontologists – most especially Tom Regan – argue that the same constraints that bar us from harming humans, also bar us from harming nonhuman animals, for example, by eating them or using them in experiments. Many deontologists would disagree. This illustrates my earlier claim ("Theorizing about Ethics") that it is best not to think of theories as prescriptions for moral action, but rather as different ways of reasoning morally.

As I mentioned earlier, rights talk is often an element of much deontological thinking. However, this talk plays a special role in that thinking. As Rainbolt correctly notes, the notion of rights pervades any number of entries in this volume. The problem is that people often make frivolous claims of rights. Rainbolt seeks to carefully distinguish between frivolous and serious claims. One of the key distinctions he makes is between an active and a passive right. Although his use of this terminology differs somewhat from other authors, you will see the distinction at work in a variety of essays, including Pogge's discussion of GLOBAL JUSTICE.

Hursthouse describes the third major theory: virtue ethics. Virtue theory differs significantly from the other standard theories. While consequentialists and deontologists are concerned about what people morally ought to do and are forbidden from doing, virtue theory is primarily concerned about the kinds of character we should develop. Virtue theorists hold that any life worth living must be one in which people inculcate the virtues. The excellent person is one who not only does what the virtuous person does, but does so for the right reasons. He or she must also enjoy doing it.

This theory differs fairly dramatically from the first two. So much so that you might wonder if such a theory can give us any guidance in knowing how to behave. Many virtue theorists think it can. For instance, in her essay on abortion, Hursthouse claims that the current debate over ABORTION is dominated by consequentialists and deontologists, and thereby unduly narrows the moral questions. She claims we should be asking not only what a woman should be permitted to do, but what a virtuous person would do. In a vaguely similar way, Hill argues that thinking about the virtues (human excellences) could lead one to cherish nonsentient nature in ways that would lead her to preserve nature for reasons not given on standard ethical grounds (ENVIRONMENT).

These four essays do not cover all the theoretical territory; in particular, they omit feminist ethics, which I briefly discuss in "Theorizing about Ethics". However, they do provide a broad map of the principal theories. And they do so in a way that helps the reader better see the interrelationship between theory and practice.

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1

Consequentialism

William H. Shaw

Philosophers use the term *consequentialism* to identify a general way of thinking about right and wrong. Consequentialist ethical theories maintain that right and wrong are a function of the consequences of our actions – more precisely, that our actions are right or wrong because, and only because, of their consequences. The *only because* is important since almost all ethical theories take consequences into account when assessing actions, and almost all philosophers believe that the consequences of our actions at least sometimes affect their rightness or wrongness. What distinguishes consequentialist from nonconsequentialist ethical theories is their insistence that when it comes to rightness or wrongness, at the end of the day nothing matters but the results of our actions.

When consequentialists affirm that the results or consequences of an action determine whether it is right or wrong, they have in mind, more specifically, the value of those results. That is, it is the goodness or badness of an action's consequences that determines its rightness or wrongness. Different consequentialist theories link the rightness or wrongness of actions to the goodness or badness of their results in different ways. The most common type of consequentialism, however, asserts that the morally right action for an agent to perform is the one that has the best consequences or that results in the most good. It is thus a maximizing doctrine. Unless stated otherwise, this is what I shall have in mind when discussing consequentialism. According to it, we are not merely permitted or encouraged, but morally required, to act so as to bring about as much good as we can. Consequentialists are interested in the consequences not only of one's acting in various positive ways, but also of one's refraining from acting. For example, if I ignore a panhandler's request for money, then one result of this may be that her children eat less well tonight. If so, then consequentialists will take this fact into account when assessing my conduct.

It could happen that two actions will have equally good results. In that case, there is no single best action and, hence, no uniquely right action. The agent acts rightly if he or she performs either of them. Another possibility is that an action might have bad consequences and yet be the right thing to do. This will be the case if all the alternatives have worse results. Finally, when consequentialists refer to the results or consequences of an action, they have in mind the entire upshot of the action, that is, its overall outcome. They are concerned with whether, and to what extent, the world is better or worse because the agent has elected a given course of conduct. Thus, consequentialists can take into account whatever value, if any, an action has in itself as well as the goodness or badness of its effects.

This essay is a revised and abridged version of William H. Shaw, "The Consequentialist Perspective," in James Dreier, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 5–20. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons Ltd and the author.

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The Good is Agent-Neutral and Independent of the Right

Consequentialism assumes that we can sometimes make objective, impartial, and agent-neutral judgments about the comparative goodness or badness of different states of affairs. At least sometimes it will be the case that one outcome is better than another outcome – not better merely from some particular perspective, but better, period. Thus, for example, it is a better outcome (all other things being equal) when eight people have headaches and two people die than when two people have headaches and eight people die. Most people believe this, as do most philosophers, including most nonconsequentialists. However, some nonconsequentialists contend that this idea makes no sense (e.g., Thomson, 2001, pp. 12–19, 41). A given state of affairs can be better for Fred (or worse for Sarah) than another state of affairs, they say, but it can't be said to be just plain better (or worse). There is no such thing as being just plain better, only better for someone, better along some given dimension, or better from some particular perspective. Consequentialists disagree.

They take it for granted not only that the goodness or badness of an action's outcome is an objective, agent-neutral matter, but also that this is something that can be identified prior to, and independently of, the normative assessment of the action. The point, after all, of consequentialism is to use the goodness or badness of an action to determine its rightness or wrongness. And circularity would threaten the theory if our notions of right and wrong infect our assessment of consequences as good or bad. Consequentialism thus assumes that we can identify states of affairs as good or bad, better or worse, without reference to normative principles of right and wrong.

Probable Consequences, Not Actual Consequences, Are What Count

According to consequentialism, then, an action is right if and only if nothing the agent could do would have better results. However, we rarely know ahead of time and for certain what the consequences will be of each of the possible actions we could perform. Consequentialism therefore says that we should choose the action, the expected value of the outcome of which is at least as great as that of any other action open to us. The notion of expected value is mathematical in origin and conceptualized as follows: Every action that we might perform has a number of possible outcomes. The likelihood of those outcomes varies, but each can be assumed to have a certain probability of happening. In addition, each possible outcome of a given action has a certain value; that is, it is good or bad to some specified degree. Assume for the sake of discussion that we can assign numbers both to probabilities and to values. One would then calculate the expected value of hypothetical action A, with (let us suppose) three possible outcomes, by multiplying the probability of each outcome by its value and summing the three figures. Suppose that the first possible outcome has a probability of 0.7 and a value of 3, the second outcome has a probability of 0.2 and a value of –1, and the third outcome a probability of 0.1 and a value of 2. The expected value of A is thus $(0.7 \times 3) + (0.2 \times -1) + (0.1 \times 2)$, which equals 2.1. A is the right action to perform if and only if no alternative action has a greater expected value than this.

In reality, of course, we never have more than rough estimates of probabilities and values. Indeed, we are likely to be ignorant of some possible outcomes or misjudge their goodness or badness, and we may overlook altogether some possible courses of action. Nevertheless, the point being made is important. Consequentialism instructs the agent to do what is likely to have the best results as judged by what a reasonable and conscientious person in the agent's circumstances would be expected to know. It might turn out, however, that because of untoward circumstances, the action with the greatest expected value ends up producing poor results – worse results, in fact, than several other things the agent could have done instead. Assuming that the agent's original estimate of expected value was correct (or, at least, the most accurate estimate we could reasonably expect one to have arrived at in the circumstances), then this action remains the right thing to have done. Indeed, it is what the agent should do if he or she were to face the same situation again, with the same probabilities as before. On the other hand, an agent might perform an action that has less expected value than several other actions the agent could have performed, and yet, through a fortuitous chain of

circumstances, it turns out that the action has better results, brings more good into the world, than anything else the agent could have done. Nevertheless, consequentialism asserts that the agent acted wrongly.

Some consequentialists adopt the rival view that the right action is the one that actually brings about the best results (or would in fact have brought about the best results, had it been performed), regardless of its expected value. How can it be right, they ask, to do what in fact had suboptimal results? Or wrong to do the thing that had the best results? Because these consequentialists still want the agent to act in whatever way is likely to maximize value, they draw a distinction between objective rightness and the action it would have been reasonable (or subjectively right) for the agent to perform. Comparing the actual results of what we did with what the actual results would have been, had we done an alternative action, raises philosophical puzzles, given that science tells us that the universe is indeterministic and that the consequences of our actions stretch indefinitely into the future. However, the main reason for orienting consequentialism toward probable results rather than actual results is that the theory, like other ethical theories, is supposed to be prospective and action guiding. In acting so as to maximize expected value, the agent is doing what the theory wants him to do, and he is not to be blamed, nor is he necessarily to modify his future conduct, if this action does not, in fact, maximize value. Accordingly, consequentialists should say, I believe, that this is not merely the reasonable, but also the morally right, way for the agent to act.

Further comments on the uncertainty of consequences

Critics of consequentialism point to the inevitable uncertainty of our knowledge of future events, arguing that this uncertainty undermines the viability of consequentialism. Although, as was just discussed, we don't have to know what the outcome of an action will be in order to estimate its expected value, in fact we are unlikely to know all the possible outcomes an action might have or to do more than guess at their comparative probabilities. And, depending on the particular theory of value the consequentialist adopts, he or she will have greater or lesser difficulty assigning values to those outcomes. These problems are compounded by the fact that the consequences of our actions continue indefinitely into the future, often in ways that are far from trivial even if they are unknowable.

Consequentialists can concede these points, yet affirm the viability of their theory. First, they can stress that, despite our ignorance, we already know quite a lot about the likely results of different actions. The human race wasn't born yesterday, and in reflecting on the possible consequences of an action, we do so with a wealth of experience behind us. Although by definition the specific situation in which one finds oneself is always unique, it is unlikely to be the first time human beings have pondered the results of performing actions of type A, B, or C in similar sorts of circumstances. Second, consequentialists can stress that the difficulties we face in identifying the best course of action do not undermine the goal of endeavoring to bring about as much good as we can. Whether we are consequentialists or not, we must act. And even though ignorance and uncertainty plague human action, they don't prevent us from striving to do as much good as we can. Third, and finally, consequentialists can point out that uncertainty about the future is a problem for other normative theories as well. Almost all normative theories take into account the likely consequences of the actions open to the agent and are thus to some extent infected by uncertainty about the future.

Utilitarianism

Consequentialism is not a complete ethical theory. It tells us to act so as to bring about as much expected good as we can, but it doesn't say what the good is. Thus, depending on one's theory of value, there are different ways of filling out consequentialism and turning it into a complete ethical theory. Utilitarianism represents one way, and it is worth saying a little about it because utilitarianism is the most influential as well as the most widely discussed consequentialist ethical theory.

Utilitarianism takes happiness or, more broadly, well-being to be the only thing that is good in itself or valuable for its own sake. We don't need to explore what well-being involves to point out some important features of utilitarianism's value theory. First, a state of affairs is good or bad to some degree (and better or

worse than some other state of affairs) only in virtue of the goodness or badness of the lives of particular individuals. There is no good or bad above and beyond that, no good or bad above and beyond the happiness or unhappiness of individuals. Second, utilitarians believe that the good is additive, that is, that total or net happiness is the sum of the happiness or unhappiness of all the individuals we are considering. More happiness here counterbalances less happiness there. Underlying this, of course, is the assumption that in principle we can compare people's levels of happiness or well-being. But one shouldn't interpret this assumption too strictly. Utilitarians have always granted that interpersonal comparisons of happiness or well-being are difficult, and they can even concede that some issues of comparison and addition may be irresolvable in principle. Utilitarians need believe only that we can rank many states of affairs as better or worse. Finally, utilitarians believe that each person's well-being is equally valuable, and his happiness or unhappiness, her pleasure or pain, carries the same weight as that of any other person. As Bentham put it, each person counts as one, and no one as more than one.

For utilitarians, then, the standard of moral assessment is well-being, and the right course of action is the one with the greatest expected well-being. Non-utilitarian variants of consequentialism drop this exclusive commitment to well-being, seeing things other than or in addition to it as having intrinsic value. A utilitarian believes that the things we normally value – say, close personal bonds, knowledge, autonomy, or beauty – are valuable only because they typically lead, directly or indirectly, to enhanced well-being. Friendship, for instance, usually makes people happier, and human lives almost always go better with it than without it. By contrast, a non-utilitarian consequentialist might hold that some things are valuable independently of their impact on well-being – for example, that it is good that a person has autonomy or knowledge regardless of whether it makes the person's life better for him or her. A non-utilitarian consequentialist might conceivably go even further and maintain that a world with more equality or beauty or biological diversity is intrinsically better than a world with less even if no one is aware of the increased equality, beauty, or diversity and even if it makes no individual's life better.

In addition to, or instead of, challenging the unique value placed on well-being, a non-utilitarian consequentialist might deviate from utilitarianism by declining to count equally the well-being of each. For example, the non-utilitarian might believe that enhancing the well-being of those whose current level of well-being is below average is more valuable than enhancing by an equal amount the well-being of those whose current level of well-being is above average. Or the non-utilitarian consequentialist might give up the belief that the good is additive and that the net value of an outcome is a straightforward function of various individual goods and bads. G. E. Moore, for example, famously urged that the value of a state of affairs bears no regular relation to the values of its constituent parts (Moore, 1968, pp. 12–28). Although the non-utilitarian consequentialist would, in these ways, be challenging the value theory of utilitarianism, he or she would remain committed to the proposition that one is always required to act so as to bring about as much good as possible.

Consequentialism in Practice

According to consequentialism, an action is morally right if, and only if, no other action the agent could perform has greater expected value. To act in any other way is wrong. The consequentialist criterion of rightness is thus pretty straightforward, but the theory's practical implications can be surprisingly subtle.

Praise and blame

For consequentialists whether an agent acted wrongly is distinct from the question whether he or she should be blamed or criticized for so acting (and, if so, how severely). Consequentialists apply their normative standard to questions of blame or praise just as they do to questions of rightness or wrongness. In particular, they will ask whether it will maximize expected good to criticize someone for failing to maximize expected good. Blame, criticism, and rebuke, although hurtful, can have good results by encouraging both the agent and other people to do better in the future, whereas neglecting to reproach misconduct increases the likelihood that the agent (or others) will act in the same unsatisfactory way the next time around. However, in some circumstances

to blame or criticize someone for acting wrongly would be pointless or even detrimental – for example, if the person did so accidentally, was innocently misinformed, or was suffering from emotional distress. In such circumstances, chastising the person for not living up to the consequentialist standard might do more harm than good.

Suppose that a well-intentioned agent acted in a beneficial way, but that she could have produced even more good had she acted in some other way. Should consequentialists criticize her? Depending on the circumstances, the answer may well be no. Suppose she acted spontaneously but in a way that was unselfish and showed genuine regard for others, or suppose that she could have produced more good only by violating a generally accepted rule, the following of which usually produces good results. Or imagine that pursuing the other, even better course of conduct would have required a disregard for self-interest or for the interests of those who are near and dear to her that is more than we normally or reasonably expect from human beings. In these cases, blame would seem to have little or no point. Indeed, if the agent brought about more good than most people do in similar situations, we may want to encourage others to follow her example. Praising an agent for an action that fails to live all the way up to the consequentialist standard can sometimes be right. Consequentialists applaud instances of act-types they want to encourage, and they commend motivations, dispositions, and character traits they want to reinforce.

Motives, dispositions, and character traits

Consequentialists generally take an instrumental approach to motives. Good motives are those that tend to produce right conduct whereas bad motives are those that tend to produce wrongful conduct. Consequentialists generally assess dispositions, behavioral patterns, and character traits in the same instrumental way: One determines which ones are good, and how good they are, by looking at the actions they typically lead to. According to some value theories, however, certain motives are intrinsically, not just instrumentally, good or bad; likewise, the exercise of certain dispositions or character traits might be judged intrinsically good or bad. If so, then the presence or absence of these factors will affect the overall goodness or badness of an outcome.

Even if a consequentialist adopts, as most of them do, an entirely instrumental approach to the assessment of motives, dispositions, and character traits, it doesn't follow that the agent's only motivation or sole concern ought to be the impartial maximization of good. To the contrary, the consequentialist tradition has long urged that more good may come from people acting from other, more particular motivations, commitments, and dispositions – for instance, from the love of virtue for its own sake or out of devotion to friends and family – than from their acting only and always from a desire to promote the general good. Furthermore, a consequentialist should not try to compute the probabilities of all possible outcomes before each and every action. Even if this were humanly possible, it would be absurd and counterproductive. At least in trivial matters and routine situations, stopping and calculating will generally lead to poor results. One does better by acting from certain motives or habits or by doing what has usually proved right in similar situations. Consequentialism thus implies that one should not always reason as a consequentialist or, at least, that one should not always reason in a fully and directly consequentialist way. Better results may come from people acting in accord with principles, procedures, or motives other than the basic consequentialist one.

This last statement may sound paradoxical, but the consequentialist standard itself determines in what circumstances we should employ that standard as our direct guide to acting. The proper criterion for assessing actions is one matter; in what ways we should deliberate, reason, or otherwise decide what to do (so as to meet that criterion as best we can) is a separate issue.

Following moral rules

Although consequentialism bases morality on one fundamental principle, it also stresses the importance in ordinary circumstances of following certain well-established rules or guidelines that can generally be relied upon to produce good results. Utilitarians, for example, believe that we should make it an instinctive practice to tell the truth and keep our promises because doing so produces better results than does case-by-case calculation. Relying on secondary rules helps consequentialists deal with the no-time-to-calculate problem and the future-consequences-are-hard-to-foresee problem. It can

also counteract the fact that even conscientious agents can err in estimating the likelihood of a particular result and thus the expected value of a given action. In particular, when our interests are engaged or when something we care about is at stake, bias can unconsciously skew our deliberations. For this reason, we are generally less likely to go wrong and more likely to promote good by cleaving to well-established secondary rules. Finally, when secondary rules are well known and generally followed, then people know what others are going to do in certain routine and easily recognizable situations, and they can rely on this knowledge. This improves social coordination and makes society more stable and secure.

An analogy with traffic laws and regulations illuminates these points. Society's goal, let's assume, is that the overall flow of automobile traffic maximize benefit by getting everyone to his or her destination as safely and promptly as possible. Now imagine a traffic system with just one law or rule: Drive your car so as to maximize benefit. It's easy to see that such a one-rule traffic system would be far from ideal and that we do much better with a variety of more specific traffic regulations. Without secondary rules telling them, for example, to drive on the right side of the road and obey traffic signals, drivers would be left to do whatever they thought best at any given moment depending on their interpretation of the traffic situation and their calculation of the probable results of alternative actions. The results of this would clearly be chaotic and deadly.

For the reasons just canvassed, consequentialists of all stripes agree that to promote the good effectively, we should, at least sometimes, rely and encourage others to rely on secondary rules, precepts, and guidelines. Moreover, in many cases the full benefit of secondary rules can only be reaped when they are treated, not merely as guidelines or rules of thumb, but rather as moral rules – rules that, once internalized, one is strongly inclined to follow, to feel guilty about failing to adhere to, and to invoke when assessing the conduct of others. Having people strongly disposed, say, to tell the truth, keep their word, or refrain from interfering with other people's property can have enormous utility.

In practice, then, consequentialists approach issues of character and conduct from several distinct angles. First, about any action they can ask whether it was right in the sense of maximizing expected value. Second, they can ask whether it was an action the agent should have performed, knowing what she knew (or should have known) and feeling the obligation she should have felt to adhere to the rules that consequentialists would want people in her society to stick to. Third, if the action fell short in this respect, consequentialists can ask whether the agent should be criticized and, if so, how much. This will involve taking into account, among other things, how far the agent fell short, whether there were extenuating factors, what the alternatives were, and what could reasonably have been expected of someone in the agent's shoes, as well as the likely effects of criticizing the agent (and others like her) for the conduct in question. Finally, consequentialists can ask whether the agent's motivations are ones that should be reinforced and strengthened, or weakened and discouraged, and they can ask the same question about the broader character traits of which these motivations are an aspect. Looking at the matter from these various angles produces a nuanced, multidimensional assessment, but one that reflects the complicated reality of our moral lives.

The appeal of consequentialism

As we have seen, consequentialists share the conviction that the morality of our actions must be a function of the goodness or badness of their outcomes and, more specifically, that an action is right if and only if it brings about the best outcome the agent could have brought about. True, consequentialism may tell us not to guide ourselves directly by the consequential standard of right in our day-to-day actions, but the correctness of that basic standard has struck most thinkers in the consequentialist tradition as obvious. They find it difficult to see what the point of morality could be, if it is not about acting in ways that directly or indirectly bring about as much good as possible. As John Stuart Mill wrote:

> Whether happiness be or be not the end to which morality should be referred – that it be referred to an *end* of some sort, and not left in the dominion of vague feeling or inexplicable internal conviction, that it be made a matter of reason and calculation, and not merely of sentiment, is essential to the very idea of moral philosophy; is, in fact, what renders argument or discussion on moral questions possible. That the morality of actions depends on the consequences which they tend to produce, is the doctrine of rational persons of all schools; that the good or evil of those

> consequences is measured solely by pleasure and pain, is all of the doctrine of the school of utility, which is peculiar to it (2003, p. 83).

Consequentialism's goal-oriented, maximizing approach to ethics coheres with what we implicitly believe to be rational conduct in other contexts. In particular, when seeking to advance our personal interests, we take for granted that practical rationality requires us to weigh, balance, and make trade-offs among the things we seek in order to maximize the net amount of good we obtain. Only a consequentialist approach tallies with that.

The conviction that moral assessment turns on consequences and that the promotion of what ultimately matters ought to be the guiding principle of ethics lies at the heart of consequentialism. Rival normative theories, of course, rely on other moral assumptions and appeal to different judgments and values. Consequentalists, however, believe that it counts in favor of their theory that it requires only a very small number of ethical assumptions, whereas its non-consequentialist rivals, such as the commonsense pluralism of Ross (1930), typically depend on a wide and diverse range of moral intuitions and ethical judgments. Moreover, the ethical assumptions on which consequentialists rely are not only few in number, but also very general in character, whereas non-consequentialist theorists typically appeal to a variety of more specific lower-level normative intuitions. These intuitions – about the rightness or wrongness of specific types of conduct or the correctness of certain normative rules – seem more likely to be distorted by the authority of cultural tradition and the influence of customary practice than are the more abstract, high-level intuitions upon which consequentialism relies.

Objections to Consequentialism

Many critics of consequentialism object to it on the ground that the theory will sometimes condone or even require immoral conduct. They believe that it is wrong to do certain things even if our doing so would bring about the most good. They also argue that consequentialism demands too much of us and that morality does not command us to be always and continually doing as much good as we can. In contrast to consequentialists, then, these critics affirm certain deontological restrictions on our conduct and embrace certain deontological permissions to act without regard to the greater good.

Deontological restrictions

Because consequentialism entails that an action's rightness or wrongness depends on its expected consequences in the particular circumstances facing the agent, it follows that almost anything – telling a lie, for instance, or breaking a promise – might be right if it brought about more good than anything else the agent could have done. Indeed, critics of consequentialism contend that it is possible that the theory might require one to do something seriously and shockingly immoral, such as to kill an innocent person, torture a small child, or frame someone for a crime he didn't commit, if doing so brought about the most good.

The likelihood that a consequentialist theory will require conduct that conflicts with the injunctions of everyday morality will depend in part on its particular value theory. Most consequentialists, however, concede that in unusual circumstances their theory could require us to do something, such as, breaking a promise, that it is normally wrong to do. However, they will insist that in the real world it is extremely unlikely – almost impossible – that the theory would require us to do something that is truly evil or horrible, such as torturing a small child. Moreover, the priority consequentialists give to promoting rules, motives, and dispositions that typically produce good results implies that they will endorse most of the normative restrictions that commonsense morality places on our conduct because adhering to them tends to maximize expected benefit.

Even if a consequentialist theory entails that in the abstract it could be right, if the circumstances were bizarre enough, to torture an innocent child, in practice it makes for a much better world if people's characters are such that they would never even entertain the idea of doing so, regardless of the circumstances. True, if placed in the imaginary world where torturing the child maximizes good, such people will do the wrong thing (as judged by the consequentialist standard) by refraining from torturing the child. But the real world in which we live is certainly better the more widespread the inhibition on harming children is and the more

deeply entrenched it is in people's psychology. Consequentialists prefer people to have the moral motivations that bring the best results in the world they actually live in, even if these motivations might lead them to behave suboptimally in fanciful situations.

To this, nonconsequentialists often reply that the consequentialist gets the right answer but for the wrong reason. Consequentialists, it is alleged, overlook the intrinsic wrongness of torturing. But consequentialists can explain perfectly well why torture is evil. And unless the nonconsequentialist is an absolutist, he cannot say that it is absolutely forbidden ever to torture an innocent child. What if doing so were, somehow or other, the only way to stop a war of aggression? So, the nonconsequentialist is reduced to saying that the consequentialist takes the possibility of torturing the child too lightly or is too ready to do it. But these allegations seem specious.

Nonconsequentialists believe that there are certain deontological restrictions on our conduct, that is, that an action can sometimes be wrong even though its outcome would be better than that of any alternative action. But this belief is vulnerable to consequentialist counterattack. Suppose that somehow your violating a certain deontological restriction (call it R) would result in there being fewer violations of R overall. According to the deontologist, it would still be wrong for you to violate R. This is puzzling, and it is natural to ask, "If nonviolation of R is so important, shouldn't that be the goal? How can a concern for the nonviolation of R lead to the refusal to violate R when this would prevent more extensive violations of R?" (Nozick, 1974, p. 30, slightly modified).

Admittedly, these are abstract questions, but one can imagine circumstances in which only by telling a lie (breaking a promise, killing an innocent person) can one prevent several other people from telling lies (breaking promises, killing innocent people). Faced with such situations, deontological theories will, at least sometimes, forbid an action of a certain type even when performing it would lead to there being fewer actions of the forbidden type. This fact leads consequentialists to argue that deontological restrictions are paradoxical or even irrational. For how can a normative theory plausibly say that it is wrong to act so as to decrease immoral conduct (that is, conduct that the theory itself identifies as immoral)? It seems illogical for a theory to forbid the performance of a morally objectionable act when doing so would reduce the total number of such actions and would have no other relevant consequences.

In practice consequentialists are likely to endorse many of the restrictions that deontologists insist upon. But these restrictions will be part of the moral code that consequentialists uphold in order to promote the good in the most effective way they can. However strongly agents are encouraged to adhere to these rules and to internalize a commitment to them, these restrictions are not, for the consequentialist, foundational, but derive from a more basic principle of morality.

Deontological permissions

Critics of consequentialism also claim that it sets too high a standard and demands too much of us. Their argument goes like this: At many points in our day, when we are innocently relaxing, talking with friends, or simply at work doing our jobs, we could probably be doing something else instead that would create more good. Instead of watching television tonight, we could visit a nursing home to chat and play cards with its elderly residents. Instead of going to the beach with friends, we could work with the homeless. Instead of buying a new car, we could make do with our old one and give the rest of the money to charity. And so on: Our lives are rarely so productive of good that it would be impossible for us to do more. In principle, or so the critics contend, consequentialism requires us to work around the clock for the general good.

How much sacrifice is demanded of us will depend at least in part on the consequentialist's particular theory of good, that is, on what it is we are supposed to be maximizing. Furthermore, we must bear in mind the good that (on almost any plausible value theory) is likely to come from permitting people to pursue, as much as possible, their own goals and plans, as well as the possibility that it may bring better results "for a man to aim rather at goods affecting himself and those in whom he has a strong personal interest, than to attempt a more extended beneficence" (Moore, 1968, pp. 166–7). Suppose, however, that when conjoined with our most plausible theory of good, consequentialism entails that morality demands much, much more of us than people ordinarily think. It doesn't follow from this that consequentialism is mistaken. Intuitions about these matters,