Chapter 2: Reasoning about ethics

Learning Outcomes

LO[1] **Explain how important moral reasoning is and how to apply it.**
LO[2] **Explain the difference between facts and values and why this distinction matters.**
LO[3] **Assess the use of statistics in ethical reasoning to establish ethical principles.**
LO[4] **State what an informal fallacy is and name several of the most common.**
LO[5] **Assess the strengths and weaknesses of ethical relativism as an approach to moral reasoning**
LO[6] **State the major principles of Kantianism and of utilitarianism and assess their strengths and weaknesses**
LO[7] **Identify alternative approaches to ethical reasoning**
LO[8] **Identify Your Personal Goals**

Suggested In-Class Exercise— Using the "What do you think box" at the beginning of the chapter, have students rate (on a scale of 1-7) how strongly they agree or disagree with the following statement: *As all ethics is relative, we can never agree on any objectively valid principles.* Give the class a few minutes to write out an initial explanation of why they agree or disagree, then ask for volunteers to share their thoughts with the class.

LO1: Explain how important moral reasoning is and how to apply it.

Suggested In-Class Exercise— Many students may be unfamiliar with the philosophical sense of the word "argument." Watch Monty Python's "Argument Clinic" sketch [online at <http http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQFKtI6gn9Y >; six minutes, seven seconds] and discuss different notions of what an argument is, what premises and conclusions are, etc.

- **Clarity, precision, consistency**
  Note that consistency can refer to the way we *apply principles* (e.g., in thinking about how scarce medical resources should be allocated, we need to be willing to apply the same principle to situations that affect our loved ones that we apply to society at large) as well as to the way we *use terms* (people sometimes use the word 'just' to mean *lawful* and sometimes to mean *fair*). Both kinds of consistency are crucial to good reasoning.

- **Premises, assumptions**
  Suggested In-Class Exercise— Put the following arguments on the board and ask students to identify any assumptions that are being made:
  I. "If a group of persons is singled out for different treatment in a society, then that group's individuals are deprived of the same rights as the members of the larger society; so, segregation is wrong." (Assumptions: all human beings count as "persons," no matter what race they belong to; it is wrong to deprive people of their rights.)
  II. "People know that they're risking their lives by riding motorcycles without helmets, but some people want to do it anyway. Therefore, the government should let them. This is a free country, after all." (Assumptions: the government should not restrict individuals' liberty in order to keep them from harming themselves; "freedom" should be understood as the liberty to do what one wants to do.)

- **Testing premises**
  One central method for "testing" the premises of our arguments is to ask what kinds of implications they would have. As noted in our textbook, the premise that "all people should be treated the same" might imply that we should *not* provide sign-language interpreters for the deaf. In the abortion debate, some premises that support abortion imply that infanticide is morally acceptable, too. In warfare, the assumption that we should never intentionally kill another human being implies that the United States should not have entered World War II. When our premises yield undesirable implications, we have three options: (i) reject the premise; (ii) "bite the bullet" and accept those undesirable implications; and (iii) revise the premise so that the core of our view remains intact, but undesirable implications no longer follow.
- **Drawing conclusions**
- **Avoiding fallacies**

LO2: Explain the difference between facts and values and why this distinction matters.

- **The is-ought distinction**
- **Facts: *descriptions* of the way the world is**
- **Values: *normative* clams about the way the world ought to be**
- **The relationship between facts and values**
  Illustrations from the textbook include end-of-life care and the atomic bomb. How much should we do to keep a suffering, terminally ill person alive? When, if ever, is it permissible to use nuclear weapons? Science can tell us much about the relevant empirical facts, but questions like these lie outside its purview.
- **When facts matter**

LO3: Assess the use of statistics in ethical reasoning to establish ethical principles.

- **Does majority opinion prove anything?**
  Loving v. Virginia is a good illustration of the idea that a majority can simply be wrong about what is morally permissible.
- **Do statistics ever matter in ethical reasoning?**
  At a minimum, changes in attitudes give us reason to ask *why* people are thinking differently than they once did.
- **How is ethical reasoning similar to legal reasoning?**
  Important similarities include the use of rational argumentation, emphases on clarity and precision, and an investigation into the logical connections between ideas.
- **How is it different?**
  Legal reasoning emphasizes what the positive law actually says and what its authors' intentions actually were. These matters are relatively unimportant from the point of view of morality. Also, ethical reasoning may be thought to have a broader scope: whereas the law deals largely with the proper limits of state coercion/regulation, we may face ethical questions in virtually any domain of human life. (Example: virtually no one is likely to support a law banning laziness, but I may wonder whether it's morally permissible for me to play video games all day when I know

that there are people who could use my help.) Precedent plays an important role in legal reasoning, but not in philosophical ethics.

LO4: State what an informal fallacy is and name several of the most common.

- **Fallacy: an unreliable means of arguing**
- **Informal fallacy: common in everyday discourse**
  Suggested In-Class Exercise— Divide the class into five groups. Assign two of the informal fallacies in the following list to each group, and give them a few minutes to (i) define their assigned fallacies and (ii) illustrate them using examples of their own choosing.
    - **Ad hominem**
    - **Faulty analogy**
    - **Begging the question**
    - **Equivocation**
    - **Hasty generalization**
    - **Appeal to ignorance**
    - **Post hoc, ergo propter hoc**
    - **Red herring**
    - **Slippery slope**
    - **Strawman**

Note: Table 2.1 appears as a critical thinking exercise near the end of the PowerPoint slides for this chapter.

LO5: Assess the strengths and weaknesses of ethical relativism as an approach to moral reasoning

- **Tolerance and relativism**
  Suggested In-Class Exercise— Have students take a moment to write out their own definitions of "tolerance" and "open-mindedness." Discuss those definitions, and seek consensus about what we ought to mean when using those terms.
  In discussion of the points that follow, apply the students' definitions and note that there are very plausible ways of understanding tolerance and open-mindedness which are fully compatible with the rejection of ethical relativism.
- **Cultural relativism: descriptive claim that there is disagreement on ethical rules**
- **Ethical relativism: normative claim that there are no universal ethical rules that apply to everyone**
  The standard strategy for rebutting ethical relativism is the *reductio ad absurdum* approach illustrated in our textbook. It might also be noted that one cannot consistently be an ethical relativist and maintain that "everyone ought to be tolerant and open-minded."

LO6: State the major principles of Kantianism and of utilitarianism and assess their strengths and weaknesses

- **Kantianism**
  - **Objectivist: there are universal principles that apply to all rational beings**
  - **Intrinsic value of our actions**
  - **Categorical imperative: a requirement all must follow**
    Key aspects of the Categorical Imperative discussed in the textbook include its:
    - similarity to the Golden Rule;
    - role as a test for universalizability; and
    - first ("Act only on that maxim…") and second (the "practical imperative" or "humanity principle") formulations

    Challenges to Kantianism worth raising include:
    - Kant's exceptionless moral principles are *ipso facto* implausible; and
    - Kantianism may end up licensing any behavior at all, so long as we are sufficiently clever when stating our maxims.
- **Utilitarianism (Mill)**
  - **Objectivist**
  - **Rightness and wrongness depends on the consequences of actions for all**
  - **Principle of utility: actions are right as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they produce the reverse of happiness**
    Other aspects of utilitarianism discussed in the textbook include:
    - its emphasis on the consequences for all (i.e., including the agent as well as others who are affected by the agent's action); and
    - problems of application (e.g., measuring happiness, weighing the interests of persons who do not yet exist)

    Other challenges to utilitarianism worth raising include:
    - Utilitarianism sometimes implies that we act rightly by acting unjustly (e.g., by violating an individual's rights); and
    - Classical (hedonistic) utilitarianism implies that the value of truth, familial relationships, character traits, etc. is extrinsic, stemming from those things' tendency to promote human happiness.

LO7: Identify alternative approaches to ethical reasoning

- **Virtue ethics (Aristotle)**
- **Natural law (Aquinas)**
- **Social contract (Locke)**
- **Care ethics (Held)**

LO8: Identify Your Personal Goals

- **What ethical issues are most important to you?**
  Note that the examples in the textbook refer to specific, real-life cases. Students should be aware that they can choose to focus on a broader social issue as well.
  Of special importance is to emphasize that the goal in this journal is *not* to decide what one's conclusion is and then find a clever way to justify (or rationalize) that conclusion.
- **What are your goals in addressing those ethical issues?**

Critical thinking exercise

This content corresponds to Table 2.1 in the textbook.
"If we truly support 'justice for all,' then we should insist that non-human animals have equal rights with humans."

- **Critical thinking steps**
  - **Examine and clarify key terms and concepts**
  - **Work through the meaning of the key terms and concepts to make sure you will use them consistently**
  - **Build premises and bring any assumptions to light**
  - **Test/verify your premises**

The questions below are the "Questions for Reflection" that precede each excerpt in the textbook. Several are also included as essay questions in the test bank for chapter 2.

Immanuel Kant on Respect for Persons

1. **What is "good will" for Kant? Why is it good without qualification? How does it differ from other good things?**
   "Good will" is the volition to act for the sake of the moral/rational law. It is good without qualification, and differs from all other good things, because it alone cannot become "extremely bad and mischievous" (p. 30). "A good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness" (p. 30).
   All of this is because the good will is a perfect expression of our rational nature.

2. **What is a hypothetical imperative? A categorical imperative? How do categorical imperatives get their authority?**
   A hypothetical imperative expresses a "duty" that is contingent upon an agent's goals or desires. A categorical imperative expresses a duty that applies to all rational beings, and its authority is grounded in reason itself.
   It is absolutely central for Kant that human beings are by nature rational beings. This is what makes us *persons*, it is what gives us *dignity* (rather than a "value"), and it is what sets us apart from other living things.
   The source of categorical imperatives' authority is a complicated matter. Part of the story has already been suggested: because we are rational beings, and because a categorical imperative is an expression of the rational moral law, we can say that categorical imperatives get their authority from reason itself; they are rationally authoritative in a way similar to that in which

the laws of logic are rationally authoritative. But they also receive authority by virtue of being *legislated*, which is the subject of question #3.

3. **What is the importance of human autonomy for ethics? How can we be subject to a law of our own will? How does that make us autonomous?**
One plausible way to understand Kantian autonomy is in terms of rational agents *concurring* with the categorical imperative(s) of the moral law. We freely choose to submit to the authority of reason, reason which is universal in its scope and content (i.e., all rational agents who deliberate correctly will legislate the same moral law) and which is an expression of our own nature—and, hence, the only sure route to real personal fulfillment and happiness.
We can be subject to the law because—as a matter of universal reason—it is not something that we merely invent. (It should be emphasized that Kant is no relativist about ethics.) Nevertheless, we are autonomous by virtue of freely legislating that law for ourselves.

4. **What is Kant's "kingdom" or "realm" of ends? What role does that play in his ethics?**
Any collection of individuals under a system of laws is, for Kant, a kingdom. All rational beings—i.e., all persons—are citizens of the kingdom of ends, each legislating for him/herself the moral law, and each one an end in him/herself, worthy of respect.

John Stuart Mill on Utilitarianism

1. **Mill distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures. How does he do this? Is his proposal credible?**
Mill believes that "Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites" (p. 36) and that real happiness involves the use of those faculties. He believes that we see the truth of this doctrine when we consider the opinion of those who are equally well acquainted with both intellectual and merely sensual pleasures.
With respect to the credibility of Mill's proposal, two issues may be worth discussing. First, one might wonder whether there is an objectively or universally true answer to the question "what kinds of pleasures are best?" Intellectual pleasures may be best for Mill, but it is not obvious that the same will be true for everyone. Second, one might worry that his methodology is suspect: there may be pleasures—e.g., the sadist's pleasure in having another person entirely within his/her power—that should be accorded no positive weight whatsoever in a sound moral calculus.

2. **How does Mill respond to the criticism that utilitarianism is "a doctrine worthy only of swine"? Is this an effective response?**
Mill responds by making the distinction noted above between higher and lower pleasures, and emphasizing that a savvy utilitarian, in seeking to maximize happiness, will first and foremost seek to maximize the higher pleasures.
Mill's famous line is worth discussing here: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question."

3. **Is it unrealistic to expect people to always act in the interests of all people? Is this what any ethical theory should accomplish? How does Mill respond to this criticism?**
    Mill emphasizes the connection between others' happiness and our own, and emphasizes that, most of the time, our actions will impact a fairly small number of people, and it is these persons' interests we must have in mind.

4. **How do Mill's ethical proposals differ from Kant's? Do they have anything in common?**
    The most obvious differences between the two thinkers are their opposing views on the moral importance (or unimportance) of consequences and acting for the sake of duty.
    Important similarities include the fact that both are objectivists, and both see a strong connection between acting rightly and the pursuit of happiness.

Questions for Discussion

- How should we understand the relationship between science and ethics? Do the two domains overlap a lot, a little, or not at all? Is each helpful to the other, or are they wholly independent?

- Why is ethical relativism such an attractive view to so many people?

- What does it mean to be "tolerant"? "Open-minded"? Does ethical relativism provide a sound basis for these virtues? Does ethical objectivism threaten them?

- A traditional Kantian emphasizes reason and respect for duty in ethics. What does this imply about the role of emotions? Is this implication a strength of Kantianism, or a weakness?

- Critics of utilitarianism often argue that the utilitarian approach to morality cannot account for individual rights. For example, utilitarianism seems to imply that it would be morally right to kill an innocent person if doing so were the best way to prevent a mob from becoming violent. Is it true that utilitarians cannot account for individual rights? If so, is this a serious problem for their view?