

# Introduction to Teaching Ethical Theory

## Introduction

Since ethics is not an optional theme or an area of knowledge itself, the divisions of Scope, Perspectives, Methods and tools and Ethics are themselves not fully applicable here and are not used as headings in the online 'Introduction to Ethical Theory' that accompanies the student book. In this teacher's resource, however, they will be used as they might have been used, in the hope that this will help teachers navigate through their treatment of ethical knowledge. The student resource on ethics is not designed to give a full TOK treatment of ethical knowledge but it is an attempt to develop some preliminary concepts that can then be used to unpack ethical considerations of the optional themes and the areas of knowledge.

In previous iterations of the course, the fact that ethics was optional meant that it was possible for students to work their way through the TOK course without ever having to deal directly with ethics as a type of knowledge or explore the ethical consequences of knowledge in the AOKs. This has been changed. Because ethics now is part of the knowledge framework in every AOK and optional theme, it is expected that students will engage with it on a regular basis and might be explicitly asked about ethical issues relating to the AOKs in the titles for the essay on a prescribed title. If this element is not discussed in the context of your teaching, it may result in a genuine disadvantage if one of the prescribed titles asks the student to explore ethics: they will have fewer real choices if they have not studied it in class. They can, of course, choose any title they wish, but they place before themselves a much greater challenge if they have to work through some of the ethical issues without ever practising them in class.

### ■ TOK TRAP

In the 'Introduction to Ethical Theory' that accompanies the student book we take a fair bit of time to highlight a trap that many students (and teachers) fall into, namely mistaking the solving of an ethical dilemma with TOK second-order analysis. Teachers should take real care in their management of ethical discussions because very often the discussion becomes focused on what the right solution to the dilemma is, rather than a second-order analysis of how the principles used in such a solution are constructed.

## Scope

Ethical knowledge represents quite a different sort of knowledge in the world and it is not entirely clear just how to treat it in relation to other established approaches to constructing knowledge. Ethical knowledge, however it relates to other forms of knowledge, clearly is about two things:

- ethical claims provide claims about value, ie, what is 'good' or 'right'
- ethical claims provide guidance for our behaviour.

In terms of value, we are not referring to monetary value; we mean judgments about the goodness or rightness of actions. Saying something is 'good' is to say that it should be done, that there is something about the action that somehow obligates us to do that action. But the way in which this obligates us is not like how social convention or laws obligate us, because we can also understand clearly that a law might be an ethically good or bad law. Even if we are obligated by law to do certain things (such as not allow certain people to vote or require possible voters to prove eligibility), we might still ask, 'is it ethically right to follow this law?' The obligations imposed by ethical claims are therefore distinct from the obligations imposed by law.

## ■ Ethics and morality

One thing to guide our understanding of ethics might be to unpack the differences between ethics and morality. In common usage they are often treated interchangeably. The word 'morality' derives from the Latin word *mos*, meaning habit or custom. The Latin is a translation of the Greek word *ethos* (from where we get 'ethics') meaning roughly the same thing. Etymologically, then, there seems to be little difference between the two.

Traditionally, however, 'morality' has tended to refer to the specific values and customs of a particular community. It is these *mores* ('MOR-ays') that we are meant to be sensitive towards when we travel around the world and engage with communities and cultures different from our own, and which are sometimes codified in local laws. For example, it might create awkwardness to invade another's intimate space in Japan by indiscriminate hugging. The social mores or habits are generally articulated by cultures in clear rules or prohibitions.

'Ethics' on the other hand tends to refer to rational principles and general values about what would make particular actions right and wrong. Ethics is about theories which provide rational agents the ability to make decisions in real time and generally take the form of abstract systems of value, rather than specific admonitions. Consider the discussion of ethical principles in Chapter 2 and in the Ethics section of Chapter 6 of the student book. There we meet principles like, 'maximize the greatest good' or 'act in accordance with virtue'. These principles are rational in the sense that they are accessible by any rational being, and defensible, in the sense that they are developed through argument and reason. They might, at their origin, be related to emotional or intuitive principles ('feelings of pleasure are good' for instance), but the theory is built up through appeal to rational argument and analysis. These principles then become universal decision-making tools for the individual when faced with the prospect of having to make decisions about how to behave in the world.

A TOK treatment of 'ethical' knowledge will most likely focus on this notion of a rationally defensible theoretical understanding of what makes actions right or wrong, rather than a discussion of social mores. This is because theories are generally justified and analysed against rational principles rather than social mores, which are primarily about behavioural norms and are established through other principles like customs, environmental context, history and circumstance. This is not to say that there is little feedback between social norms and ethical theory. Ethical theories articulating a woman's right to bodily autonomy for instance, have been heavily influenced by the strengthening of women's social status. There can be a lot of good TOK analysis in the exploration of how social norms have influenced the creation of ethical theory (and any other theory in AOKs for that matter).

## ■ Science and ethics

One general type of question that cuts right to the heart of the scope of ethical knowledge has to do with its relationship to scientific knowledge. Since the Enlightenment, scientific knowledge has really become the basic paradigm for what knowledge can be. The precision of its claims, the clarity of its method and the success of its use are all good reasons to sing its praises. However, the success of science and its basic assumptions about the role of observation and measurement have put other forms of knowledge under strain, particularly in terms of ethical knowledge. It is not at all clear just what is being explained or described through the use of claims like ‘capital punishment is wrong’ or ‘charity is good’. Whereas science certainly focuses on phenomenon that can be observed, or (as in the case of atoms or nano-particles) have some influence on the world which can be measured, ethical theories appear to deal with ideas and concepts that are not measurable in any way.

We will explore some knowledge questions around the notion of ‘moral facts’ and whether they are real things in the world later, but for now we might offer one solution to the nature of ethical claims, by suggesting that, really, they are just a different sort of scientific claim.

The lesson below might be helpful to explore the relationship between science and ethics.

Please note the words of caution here. Harris says nothing obviously offensive, but he does use contentious and sensitive examples (Muslim women in burqas) that may need some careful treatment.



### LESSON PLAN: CAN SCIENCE PROVIDE ETHICAL GUIDANCE?

#### Introduction

This lesson will provide students the opportunity to explore the extent to which ethical claims about what is right or wrong might be grounded in natural truths about human ‘flourishing’ and the consequences of this in terms of making moral judgments and the notion of ‘moral experts’.

The lesson is based around a TED talk by Sam Harris, a philosopher and neuroscientist, which can be watched using the QR code in the margin.

The lesson should be considered in two parts:

- the first part exploring the argument that ethical value can be tied to a notion of human flourishing
- the second part exploring applications of these concepts in various domains.

We suggest stopping the video and discussing the first part carefully and thoroughly before moving on to the second part (if at all). At the beginning of the second part, Harris starts his application with a very evocative image of women in the full burqa in what looks like Afghanistan under the Taliban. If you don’t stop before that to discuss the ideas Harris is actually defending, this image and his clear antipathy towards Islam (and religion more generally) will derail the discussions: students will only want to talk about his position on Islam or his use of the example of women in the burqa, and not on the idea that ethical values can be grounded in an understanding of human flourishing.

You *must* watch the whole video to decide the best way to manage this activity for your context and for your students.

## Aims

Students will:

- understand the possible distinction between ‘scientific fact’ and ‘ethical value’
- understand one argument that the distinction is an ‘illusion’
- understand that ‘expertise’ is a concept that can be applied to ‘ethical knowledge’
- be able to critically evaluate Harris’ own position.

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

- prepare a preliminary argument about whether there can be a science of ethics
- listen to and watch a TED talk by Harris
- discuss the video using guiding questions.

## Knowledge questions from the TOK subject guide

- In what ways do moral judgments differ from other kinds of judgments? (Knowledge and the Knower)
- Can moral disagreements be resolved with reference to empirical evidence? (Knowledge and the Knower)
- Is there such a thing as a moral fact? (Knowledge and the Knower)
- Do/how do established values change in the face of new knowledge? (Knowledge and the Knower)
- If moral claims conflict, does it follow that all views are equally acceptable? (Knowledge and the Knower)
- What role do religious leaders and authority figures play in influencing ethical debates? (Religious Knowledge Systems)
- Is science, or should it be, value free? (The Natural Sciences)
- Do we tend to exaggerate the objectivity of scientific facts and the subjectivity of moral values? (The Natural Sciences)
- Do human rights exist in the same way that the laws of gravity exist? (The Natural Sciences).

Because there is not a single section on ethics, these have been drawn from different sections of the subject guide.

## Relevant course concepts

Explanation, justification and objectivity.

## Prior learning

It might be useful to introduce or review the position that Harris is challenging – that science and ethics represent different domains and/or that there is a sharp distinction between facts (science) and values (ethics).

## Required resources

Equipment to watch video (whiteboard and projection).

You can use the QR code on the left to view some discussion notes that accompany the video.

## Activities

Opening questions:

- 1 Three-minute essay: independently, students write for three minutes on the following title: Do you think there can be a science of Ethics? Why or why not?

Encourage students to develop an argument as opposed to guesses and speculation. They need to be offering reasons for their answers (their answer is less important than their reasons): ‘Yes, because ...’ or ‘No, because ...’

Perhaps bringing to mind Hume’s ‘Is/Ought’ distinction (discussed in more detail in the sample answer later in this document).



These are helpful exercises to bring out initial thoughts – best practice would be to revisit them after the learning to see how students’ thoughts have changed or developed.



Splitting the video in half is a good way to make sure that the principles being discussed are understood before more contentious material is discussed.

This first half of the video is easily an hour's lesson.

More teacher guidance is needed for the second half of the talk.

- 2 Share to identify main positions. The video's argument then can serve as a foil to the students' own arguments. How does Harris' argument relate to their own?
- 3 Watch the Harris video up to 10:00 (up to before the slide of the women in their burqas). Assign the following guiding questions to different groups before the video begins. They will report back afterwards. (You might write these out on cards and have students pick a card).
  - What is the illusion Harris is challenging?
  - Harris says, 'There's no notion, no version of human morality and human values that I've ever come across that is not at some point reducible to a concern about conscious experience and its possible changes.' What does he mean by this?
  - Harris argues that there are objective facts about human flourishing: 'There are truths to be known about how human communities flourish, whether or not we understand these truths.' What does he mean by this?
  - Harris develops a comparison with the concept of 'health' and 'healthy food'. What is that comparison? What is that comparison meant to point out?
  - Harris says, 'Notice that the fact that the concept of health is open, genuinely open for revision, does not make it vacuous.' What is the point he is making about morality?
  - Harris suggests that one myth people believe is, 'if it's really wrong to lie, it must always be wrong to lie, and if you can find an exception, well then there's no such thing as moral truth. Why would we think this?' What is his response to this worry?
  - What are the strengths of his argument so far?
  - What are the weaknesses of his argument so far?
  - Have the thoughts you captured in your three-minute essay at the start of the lesson changed at all? If so, how?
- 4 Give the students some time in their groups to prepare their response and then to discuss in plenary.
 

This first half of the lesson (the three-minute essay, video, think, share, discuss) can easily fill an hour's lesson.
- 5 The class participates in a close listen of the second half of the talk. One option is to listen to the second half all the way through once, then return to the midpoint and start and stop the video and discuss the various sections one by one. You might use the notes to help identify some key points.
 

Some guiding questions:

  - a What are the principles that Harris is articulating here?
  - b How effective are the use of his examples in illustrating those principles?
  - c How does he ground his belief that the notion of 'moral expert' is as useful as the notion of 'expert' in other AOKs (like physics)?
  - d If Harris is right about our reluctance to offer moral judgment of other cultural practices, where do you think that reluctance comes from?
  - e How convincing do you find this argument about moral or ethical experts?
  - f How might Harris' use of language, and the ways in which he frames the discussion, suggest other beliefs of his that might be shaping his overall approach (this question is about analysing how he goes about making the argument rather than just the argument itself).
- 6 Here we suggest that you run a class discussion because the students are likely to lose sight of the central principle that Harris is articulating and defending. Students are often too focused on the examples that Harris uses to illustrate the principles, rather

than the principles themselves (this is not to suggest that considering examples is not part of the process by which we reflect on principles). In your management, encourage the students to continually ask ‘what point is this example meant to illustrate?’

The discussion in the second half focuses largely on two points: that our assumptions about the relativity of ethical values, leads us to a reluctance for offering moral judgments of others’ practices and behaviours and that this implies an ‘anything goes’ sort of approach to ethics. Harris argues both are mistaken and conflict with the types of discussions around moral behaviours that we do, in fact, have.

His conclusions are basically:

- that science can tell us what promotes human flourishing (first half)
- concepts of right and wrong should be tied to those scientific facts (first half)
- the concept of ‘expert’ is still useful in the context of ethical principles – some people have more expertise when it comes to making claims about what sorts of actions promote human flourishing
- knowing what we know about human flourishing and suffering, and knowing that we value human flourishing, means we should be challenging cultural practices (from all cultures) that limit human flourishing (and this is something we already recognize in terms of female body-image).

Harris’ strategy, however, is to illustrate his point by use of others’ cultural practices, specifically women wearing the full burqa in areas under the control of the Taliban. His judgment of this practice can make some people uncomfortable for two reasons: first, because it is sometimes assumed that other cultural practices are off-limits when it comes to moral judgment, and second, because it is sometimes assumed that there are no objective grounds upon which to stand to say that one view is better or worse than another.

In many cases, the choice of example (Muslim women in the burqa) becomes the focus of the discussion rather than the principles which the example is meant to represent. (Indeed, this is seen in the very first question Chris Anderson (the head of TED) asks in the short Q&A at the end.) If your class has fully discussed the first half of the talk and embedded that argument, then the second half is less likely to get derailed. Students (and teachers) need not agree with Harris’ principles but knowing what those principles are (that science can tell us what promotes human flourishing and that concepts of right and wrong should be tied to those scientific facts), can help navigate the difficult waters of the second half.

### Follow up

As a follow-up activity, students could do some or all of the following:

- Build on the three-minute essay starter activity by developing it into a full essay.
- With a partner, create a job advertisement for the following (these are purposefully vague): ‘An expert in science’ and ‘An expert in ethics’. What sorts of things would you expect applicants for these positions to have? Would they have certain training or education? Would they have experience and what sorts of things would you expect to see to demonstrate such experience? Would they be comparable to real people who may already have such experience? Would they be a certain age? Would they be from (or not be from) a particular background or already have a particular job? What would those transferable skills be? How similar or dissimilar do you think the job descriptions would be across different AOKs?
- Pressure presentation: over the course of one lesson, prepare a short presentation where a student and their partner answer the question: ‘Can there be a science of ethics?’

## Perspectives

In the 'Introduction to Ethical Theory' for students we offer a discussion of three 'normative' ethical theories that have been developed in order to help solve ethical dilemmas or to guide ethical decision-making. The theories are called 'normative' theories because they offer 'laws' to follow (Greek *nomos* for 'law' and Latin *norma* for 'rule' or 'precept', also referring to a carpenter's square). They are offered there as a way of promoting understanding of the nature of constructing and using ethical principles, but teachers must remember that the practice of applying the theories to a concrete situation in order to make the choice is first-order ethics. The second-order point to explore is not a solution to a dilemma but the nature of theory itself, its assumptions, its use of various sources of knowledge, and its reliability.

Normative theory	Some (but not all) TOK points worth exploring
Consequentialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Origins are in the basic principle that pleasure is good (emotions)</li> <li>■ Calculation/mathematical reason is used heavily in the counting up of pleasure (reason)</li> <li>■ Assumptions:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ that happiness/pleasure is the sort of thing that can be measured (but by what? Science?)</li> <li>□ that consequences of actions have predictable outcomes (eg, use of thalidomide)</li> <li>□ that future happiness can be predicted (science?)</li> </ul> </li> <li>■ Ends justifying the means can be used in all sorts of ways by whomever is doing the measuring (eg, Tuskegee Syphilis experiments):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ is this a way of maintaining majority power structures?</li> <li>□ who decides whose happiness is measured?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Deontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Developed as an attempt to avoid the use of emotions in moral thinking</li> <li>■ Prioritizes the role of reason in identifying moral rules and duties</li> <li>■ Prioritizes the individual as an autonomous rational being and assumes people will make rational choices</li> <li>■ Assumes that 'rational' and 'reasonable' are universal. Do different people or cultures necessarily see the same things as 'rational'?</li> <li>■ Might be a challenge to use in real-life situations where the rule needing to be followed, or the duty to be fulfilled, is not clear. Does this form of knowledge help guide us in the real world?</li> </ul>
Virtue ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Shifts focus on to the 'character' of the individual</li> <li>■ Prioritizes reason to identify the types of virtues that an individual should be enacting</li> <li>■ Assumes that virtues or 'virtuous' behaviour is equally recognizable across cultures: would everyone accept one culture's virtues as their own?</li> <li>■ Does virtue ethics avoid making any claims about the world, and if so, how useful is it as a form of knowing?</li> </ul>

### ■ Normative ethics vs meta-ethics

Another way of discussing ethical knowledge is described as 'meta-ethics' ('meta' coming from the Greek for 'above' or 'beyond'). Whereas normative ethical theories aim at constructing ethical guidelines for use in the real world, meta-ethics entails a different sort of conversation, this time about the meaning of ethical terms and the nature of ethical properties. In normative ethics we might ask, 'What course of action does this theory say

is the “good” action and therefore the one to follow in this circumstance?” Meta-ethics, however, would ask, ‘What does the word “good” mean?’ Or, ‘What is the nature of a moral fact?’ Or, ‘What are ethical claims actually saying?’

Some of the knowledge questions in the subject guide are more meta-ethical than normative. ‘Is there such a thing as a moral fact?’ is an example. No normative theory can even begin until this question is answered, for if there are no moral facts then no theory will ever be able to say anything about what is ‘good’ or ‘right’! This is similar to how in other disciplines there are certain concepts and terms that must be defined and agreed upon before work in the discipline can begin, or at least before application or use of the theories can begin. Chemists, for instance, need to move pretty quickly beyond a discussion of what ‘atomic mass’ means or what ‘chemical bonds’ are if they are to get on with the business of doing chemistry. Mathematicians need to understand the rules of inference in algebra if they have any hope of using algebra. Part of becoming an expert in these fields has to do with learning these terms and their importance. This could be why students might not even consider themselves apprentices; they have so little experience in the actual construction of knowledge, because they are caught up in learning the basics. Before an ethicist can even begin applying the theories, therefore, they must already have made some decisions about the preliminary terms, definitions and assumptions.

The following section offers a possible response to the question, ‘Is there such a thing as a moral fact?’ and then investigates the notion of ethical relativity, another meta-ethical theory.

## SAMPLE RESPONSE TO A KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

### Is there such a thing as a moral fact?

Traditionally there are two main approaches to whether we can find moral facts in the world around us. Firstly, we have ethical ‘realism’, which is the view that there are genuine facts in the world that have to do with the moral or ethical status of an action. Claims like ‘charity is good’ or ‘killing is wrong’ express objective truths about charity and killing and can be as true as ‘compasses point north’ or ‘mitochondria provide energy to cells’.

Clearly, though, a tension arises when we ask how we are meant to identify those facts, particularly in the face of clear disagreement (though perhaps ‘charity is good’ is less contentious than, say, ‘capital punishment is wrong’ or ‘wealth redistribution is good’). In TOK terms, we might ask another knowledge question here: ‘What sources of knowledge should we use to identify and articulate moral truths?’ Some people (‘ethical naturalists’) think that ethical truths are, at their most basic level, really just normal or ‘natural’ observable truths in the world. For example, utilitarianists think that if you can show that an action will result in a person’s greater wellbeing (mostly observable), then that is the same as showing that that action is ‘good’. Perhaps you can prove that donating the

organs of a patient who recently died will create more happiness for patients who would otherwise die. If you can, then this is the same as proving that this action is good. If you can prove that destroying a natural landscape so you can mine some natural resources will be worse than having that natural resource, then you have shown that the action is wrong. In other words, ethical values like ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ or ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are really just different ways of understanding observable facts about the world.

One problem with the ethical naturalist’s form of ethical realism was articulated by David Hume in his famous ‘Is/Ought’ distinction or what we might also call the ‘Fact/Value’ distinction.

Hume argued that no amount of description of some phenomenon will ever logically lead to a moral claim. No matter how well you describe something by using ‘is’ statements like ‘water is H<sub>2</sub>O’ or ‘the charge of a nucleus is positive’ or ‘if you are worth 4 210 USD you are richer than half the world’s population’ (Elkins), you won’t observe some ethical value nestled in among all the facts. For the argument to move from a set of descriptions to an ethical claim, you need to find an ethical principle which tells you the sorts of things

which are bad. Then you can derive an ethical claim related to your facts.

Consider the following:

- 1 **Fact:** Half the world's population has a net worth of less than 4210 USD.
- 2 **Definition:** This is an example of severe wealth inequality.
- 3 **Ethical principle:** Severe wealth inequality is wrong.
- 4 **Ethical claim:** It is ethically wrong that half the world's population has a net worth of less than 4210 USD (and we should do something about it).

What is the relationship between premises 1 and 2 on the one hand and premise 3 on the other? Does the truth of 1 and 2 have any bearing on the truth of 3? Hume argued no, that these claims represent fundamentally different types of knowledge.

To arrive at the ethical claim in number 4, we needed an ethical principle to bridge the gap between the ethical claims and the facts and definitions. Hume's claim was that no amount of observation or definitions of 'natural' (observable or measurable) features of the world (premises 1 and 2) will ever provide an ethical principle. So, premise 3 is not the logical outcome or conclusion of premises 1 and 2; premise 3 must be brought in from somewhere else. Hume thought it came from the emotions, while some religious believers will suggest that our ethical principles are derived from God.

Hume's use of the term 'ought' to identify ethical claims points to the odd quality of action tied to ethical claims. If we suggest something is 'good', then we imply that we ought to promote it; if we think something is 'wrong', then we ought to avoid it. We could call these types of claims 'prescriptive' in that they prescribe a certain form of behaviour. They do not (merely) describe the world, their function is to tell us what we ought to do. The claim here is that science cannot be the source of these prescriptive claims.

The TOK-related points related to this discussion focus on the scope of scientific and ethical claims. The ethical naturalists will try to argue that just by observing and measuring some natural aspect of the world (how much happiness an action produces, for example), we can thereby find out whether we ought to do that action. In other words, the scope of science is to provide ethical claims about how we ought to behave.

If this were true, however, it would make little sense to say things like, 'Torturing a prisoner for information will result in a better outcome (saving more lives), but is it right to torture the prisoner?' The naturalist would claim that knowing that more lives will be saved is the same as knowing it is the right thing to do. If you think it is still a good question to ask whether torture is acceptable, even if you also know that torture will result in a better outcome, you are not an ethical naturalist (or at least not a utilitarian).

When you see a difference between facts and values you might argue that the scope of science is limited to these observations and measurements and that they alone will never tell us what to do. When considering carefully the sorts of things that scientists do in fact describe we find that there are never any obviously ethical facts. I might measure happiness all I want, but never see 'right' or 'ought' mixed in. I can clearly see the happiness that playing a horrifically violent video game (or any other grim pleasure-inducing behaviour) might bring to some, but we might still claim that that sort of behaviour is wrong. Ethical naturalism has a difficult task to overcome this intuition.

Another ethical realist view, one that doesn't seem to fall into the critique of the Is/Ought distinction, is to claim that while ethical values are genuine facts about our world, we cannot simply measure them in the way suggested previously; we need a different source of this knowledge. 'Intuitionism' is one such view. It suggests that we have a way of directly perceiving the rightness or wrongness of an action through a sort of intuitive sense. This view certainly has common sense and general experience on its side: we often appeal to personal feelings or unanalysable intuitions to justify our ethical values ('it feels wrong'). So ethical claims like 'it is wrong to torture the prisoner for information' can be considered true, but the justification of this claim would appeal to our ethical intuitions, not to measurements of some feature in the world.

This view, however, comes under heavy criticism when trying to make sense of how ethical values differ across people and cultures: if ethical facts are 'real' facts then why can't we agree? It seems that our intuitions depend heavily on our education, our social context and even our political beliefs. This inability to pin down any objective intuitions across populations of people either leads to 'intuitive' ethical claims which are utterly vacuous ('be kind') but with no direction of how to really enact them, or to the admission that our intuitions are socially

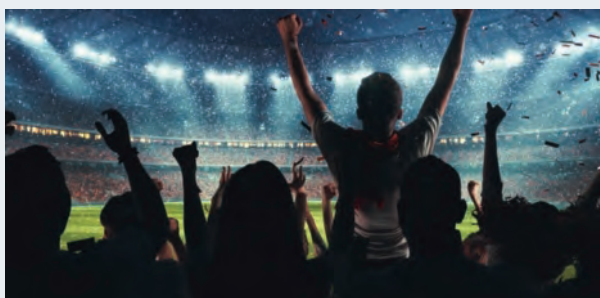


dependent, which undermines any claims to truth for ethical claims, making moral facts impossible to identify.

An opposing view to the claim that there are moral facts is called **ethical anti-realism**. As you can guess by the name, it is the opposite of 'realism'. Here the suggestion is that there are no moral facts and moral claims cannot be true, or if they are considered 'true' they are not considered genuine descriptions of the world. Moral claims might simply be expressions of personal commitments, for instance, 'Vegetarianism is right', is synonymous with the phrase, 'One of my beliefs is that vegetarianism is right'. In other words it describes my beliefs, not some feature of the world (this is called 'ethical subjectivism'). So the claim that there are 'moral facts' or moral claims that can be 'true' in this view, are just descriptions of what the speaker happens to believe. There are no moral truths or facts in the world.

Alternatively, other ethical anti-realists might say that 'charity is good' is nothing more than a way of showing approval for charity. It is like saying, 'Charity! Yay!' and giving a thumbs up, or pumping your fists and shouting 'Go Dodgers!' On the other hand, claiming 'torture is wrong' is nothing more than saying, 'Boo, torture!' with your thumbs down and furrowed brows (this is called 'ethical emotivism'). These claims do not make true or false claims, they are merely outpourings of emotional approval or disapproval.

These positions, however, are shown to be exceedingly weak when we consider the phenomenon of ethical debate. On the anti-realist view, there can be no genuine ethical debate, if by debate we mean something like weighing up various arguments in order to reach a conclusion. On the 'subjectivist' account, when we claim opposing positions, we are doing nothing more than just stating and then re-stating our beliefs. On the 'emotivist' view, we are just jumping up and down and giving thumbs up and



Some people would argue that saying something is 'ethically good' is nothing more than cheering for it

thumbs down while making ethical statements. In neither of these scenarios is there anything like debate happening.

However, we do engage in genuine ethical debates. We marshal evidence and offer reasoned positions about what is right or wrong or what we ought and ought not do. In other words, we do engage in the activity of trying to construct ethical knowledge; knowledge that, even if we cannot find the conditions under which some ethical claim is 'true', we can at least recognize better or worse ethical principles. We have pretty strong intuitions that 'it is right that women have full political engagement in society' is a better ethical position than the claim 'it is right that men are the only political agents'. It is better to say, 'IB examiners ought to mark fairly' than it is to say, 'IB examiners ought to randomly assign grades'.

Any ethical view has to make sense of the ethical values we do hold and make sense of the ethical debates that we engage in, or else we have to give up on the task of constructing ethical knowledge entirely. However, just looking at the debates around social equality, individual freedom and human rights shows that we simply cannot accept an ethical theory which says these are not genuine areas of human knowledge. Claiming that there are no moral facts leads in this direction, so is unacceptable.

This is not to say that moral facts are the same as any other fact, though. It might be that we have not yet identified an agreed upon method by which to identify moral facts or truths. Much like how the sciences are engaged in a continual search for truths about how the world works, perhaps ethical knowledge is also in a continual search. Any theory which denies from the outset that this project is impossible, just because the search is challenging, is a theory that cannot be accepted.

*Note: This exploration of the knowledge question is, as always, only one way in which the question might be explored. This response did not, for example, explore more deeply the various ways in which ethical knowledge is built, including the role of the emotions or reason. Nor did it seek to uncover more about how we do accept ethical claims, even if we don't know how to clearly justify them. Someone using different examples would approach the question in a different way. The nature of a knowledge question is that it is open ended, and so there is not a 'right' answer; there are just well-supported responses or badly supported responses.*



## ■ TOK TRAP

### Ethical relativism

'Ethical relativism' is a position that takes a number of forms, but these largely all overlap in the two claims that:

- 1 there are no universally agreed upon ethical values (ie, people have different and sometimes conflicting ethical beliefs).
- 2 there can be no one true ethical viewpoint; there will always be a variety of 'true' claims (or, never any 'true' claim).

These are importantly different claims for reasons we will discuss now.

We suggest that ethical relativism is a 'trap', not because we necessarily think it is true or false, but because the vast majority of students will think it is obviously true. As TOK teachers, we do not need to convince students that any particular ethical framework is the right one, but we do need to challenge students anytime they offer a position that is not reflected upon. Ethical relativism is one such opportunity.

First, what is the difference between the two claims above?

Claim 1 is a description of the world as we find it. It just so happens to be the case that people all over the world disagree about what acts are right and wrong, and they disagree on just how we should decide which actions are right and wrong. The evidence for this claim is overwhelming.

Claim 2, however, is a different sort of claim. It tells us what should be the case rather than describing what is the case. Claim 2 provides a rule which limits the discussion. We might call this a normative claim in the sense that it provides a law or rule (a 'norm', from the Greek for 'law' or 'custom').

The point about breaking up the main claims within ethical relativism in the way we have is so we can now ask a question about the evidence for each claim. What evidence do you have for the claim that there can be no true ethical viewpoint? The clear fact that there is a lot of disagreement in the world is really only an argument for the first claim above. There is still a possibility that many of those people who disagree are simply mistaken in their beliefs, but there is, in fact, one ethical position that is correct. We make a similar point when discussing how normative claims in the human sciences are interpretations of the economic facts available, and how these normative claims constitute quite different 'paradigms' in economics (student book, Chapter 10, page 344).

Consider an analogous case in, say, physics, which has similarities to the discussion we had of experts in the lesson above. There is some disagreement between physicists about whether string theory or loop quantum gravity will be the theory that physics will ultimately accept. However, the fact that some experts disagree in this field does not necessarily mean that there is not one answer that is the right answer or that there are not some answers that are better than others. The world is simply the way it is, and we might disagree about its nature, but ultimately we might work it out. In the meantime, we disagree. And that's okay.

Imagine taking a classroom of middle school mathematics students, who have arrived at different answers after trying to solve a complicated equation, and concluding, 'Oh well, there is



The fact that there are different answers does not mean there cannot be one that is correct

disagreement so there must be no one right answer.' Instead, we would accept that some of the students (or maybe even all of them) simply have it wrong.

So, why shouldn't this be the case with ethics? Just because I have a room full of people who have all come to different answers to an ethical dilemma or decision does not necessarily mean that there can be no right answer. Some of us (or maybe all of us) might simply have the wrong answer. So, any evidence for ethical relativism which relies on the fully accepted fact that people disagree, doesn't necessarily mean that there can be no right answer.

Of course, the advantage that the sciences and mathematics have over ethics here is that they have a clearly established and effective method. It is not clear just what method we should be using for our ethical deliberations, but again, this is not, itself, evidence that we cannot find one; it may be that we have simply not yet worked it out.

Many very smart people do believe in ethical relativism. The point here is not to tell students that this is an unjustifiable position to hold. The point rather is to underscore the need to offer justifications for our positions, not to just assume we know what we need to know to make these claims.

This discussion is a fun one to have with students: it requires some sophisticated thinking about the scope of the sciences and mathematics and their methods, and it helps unpack the difficulties around finding the students' own personal biases, assumptions or presumptions about the nature of ethical knowledge.

The trap offered by ethics is mainly about students using their assumptions to make claims that are difficult to justify – challenge them!

## Methods and tools

Much of what we have been saying about the various perspectives in ethical theories and the relationship between scientific knowledge and ethical knowledge will apply to questions about the methods and tools used to explore ethical questions. An ethical naturalist (like a consequentialist or virtue ethicist), for instance, will use the methods and tools appropriate to their perspective. A utilitarian (consequentialist) will get on with the business of trying to work out how to measure happiness and use whatever tools they have at their disposal. A deontologist will focus on using reason to judge whether the rules being followed are rational. A virtue ethicist might appeal to the findings of psychology in order to gauge whether certain character traits like honesty, perseverance or gratitude are the sorts of virtues that lead to a well-lived life.

The worry of course, when it comes to ethical deliberation is that there is no consensus on what is the right method to follow. We saw in the discussion about ethical relativity that the worry about there not being an agreed upon method to use when thinking about ethics leads some to think that there can be no method that is agreed upon. This intuition is a hard one to shake but logically it does not necessarily hold up. One might bring to mind the physicists of the early twentieth century claiming that all of physics had been sorted by Newton. We cannot let a failure of imagination when it comes to ethical deliberation lead us into a claim that there can be no better or worse ethical claims.

### ■ TOK TRAP

The go-to position for most students when they are thinking about ethics is to start from their intuition that ethics is somehow only about how we feel about things or about what society says is the case, and never move beyond this. This is an inherently relativistic position and we discussed in the earlier TOK trap the challenge of finding evidence for the normative claim that 'there can be no one true ethical viewpoint'. Discussing those claims might be a tool which students might use to begin the process of reflecting on that belief. Again, it might be true that ethics are relative to their culture or based on emotions, but without an argument we should not believe this.

## Ethics

One of the main themes that we have developed throughout both the student and teacher books is based around the inherent ethical obligations that a knowledge producer is under when constructing knowledge. Whenever you discuss the nature of a discipline's methods, or when evaluating the knowledge produced in an AOK in terms of reliability, certainty or justifiability, you are drawing on the basic assumptions that knowledge producers should be working towards quality knowledge.

One interesting case study to bring this out is the case of Holocaust denier David Irving. Irving's early career as an historian was characterized by developing historical narratives which were far more charitable to the Nazis than mainstream historians. He later claimed that the stories about the Auschwitz gas chambers were 'fairy tales' and that Hitler had actually been trying to protect Jews (Traynor). He spent time in an Austrian prison for denying the Holocaust. Ethically, we might want to judge him for his beliefs, his anti-Semitism and his prejudice, and we would be right to do so on any of the ethical theories discussed previously. But we might also judge him in a more TOK-related way by pointing out that he seems to have wilfully ignored best practice when it comes to the construction of historical narratives. So whatever one may think about Irving as a person, his beliefs or ideologies, the fact of the matter seems to be that he is not a very good historian. This illustrates the point we are making here: that creators of knowledge are thought to be ethically obligated to act rightly in the search for quality knowledge.



Use the QR code on the left to read excerpts from a UK High Court libel case in which the judge outlines numerous historical claims that are unjustified in terms of best historical practice.

Of course, what makes a claim a 'good' or 'quality' claim in one AOK might not be the same in another, so the ways in which the ethical obligation is met may look different across different AOKs. Conflict might arise, however, if we use the rules from one AOK to judge the quality of work in another AOK, and indeed many of the discussions in this course are about avoiding this situation. History cannot be judged by the rules of knowledge construction in physics. Economics will fail against the criteria for good biology. Ethical knowledge will always fall short of the requirements imposed on it by the mathematical method.

Perhaps one of the moral tasks we are involved in as TOK teachers is that of making students aware of these ethical obligations. We, ourselves, could be said to be ethically obligated to reflect on just what principles we are developing to judge the quality of knowledge. Thou shalt not use the rules of one AOK to judge the knowledge of another?

### CONNECTION TO: THE CORE THEME



Individual knowers are prone to a whole host of logical fallacies and cognitive biases. Throughout the book we have discussed them when they were relevant, but it is worth highlighting them whenever you get the chance. Pointing out the ways in which individual knowers are prone to these cognitive biases is not enough, however. Make sure to push the discussion towards how the methods of the AOKs try to mitigate the effects of these biases.

Use the QR code on the left to access a site devoted to the identification of logical fallacies and methods to avoid them (this site is also linked to in Chapter 1 of both the student book and the Teaching for Success book).



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