

# What is Ethics?

## The Three Main Areas of Ethics:

- **Metaethics**
  - the attempt to discover (i) the meaning of moral claims, (ii) the nature of moral facts (if there are any), and (iii) how we can know moral facts.
- **Normative Ethics**
  - the attempt to discover the correct moral principles
- **Practical Ethics**
  - the attempt to discover the answers to certain specific moral questions

# What is Normative Ethics?

## The Three Main Areas of Normative Ethics:

- **The Normative Ethics of Behavior**
  - the attempt to discover what makes *actions* right or wrong
- **Axiology**
  - the attempt to discover what makes *states of affairs* (e.g., people's lives, certain situations) good or bad
- **Virtue-Vice Theory**
  - the attempt to discover what makes a *person* a good person or a bad person

# The Normative Ethics of Behavior

## *The Case of Baby Theresa*

Many kinds of question about this case:

- scientific
- legal
- religious
- psychological
- **moral**



“Would it be right for the parents to remove Baby Theresa’s organs, thereby causing her immediate death, to help the other children?”

(Rachels, p. 2)

# Moral Principles

To answer the moral question about Baby Theresa, we use a *moral principle*.

A **moral principle** is a statement saying that some *kind* of action is always morally right (or morally wrong, or morally obligatory).

We explain the rightness or wrongness of some *particular* action (such as the removing of Baby Theresa organs) by appealing to a moral principle.

# Moral Principles

Some possible principles for the case of Baby Theresa ...

KSP: It is wrong to kill one person to save another.

PGP: It is wrong to play God.

BP: If we can benefit someone without harming anyone else, we ought to do so.

# Moral Principles

For a moral principle to yield a verdict about a particular case, we also need to appeal to some fact about the case.

## Baby Theresa Argument

P1. It is wrong to kill one person to save another.

C. Therefore, it's wrong to remove Baby's Theresa's organs in order to save another child.

VALID or INVALID ?

# Moral Principles

## Baby Theresa Argument (improved)

- moral principle → P1. It is wrong to kill one person to save another.
- fact about the case → P2. To remove Baby's Theresa's organs in order to save another child is to kill one person to save another.
- moral conclusion about the case → C. Therefore, it's wrong to remove Baby's Theresa's organs in order to save another child.

**VALID**

or

**INVALID**

?

# Moral Principles

It's not always obvious whether some *alleged* fact about the case *really is* a fact about the case.

## Playing God Argument

P1. It's wrong to play God.

*Is this true?* → P2. To remove Baby's Theresa's organs in order to save another child is to play God.

C. Therefore, it's wrong to remove Baby's Theresa's organs in order to save another child.

↓  
It depends what 'play God' means.



# Fully General Moral Principles

None of the three principles we have mentioned so far ...

KSP: It is wrong to kill one person to save another.

PGP: It is wrong to play God.

BP: If we can benefit someone without harming anyone else, we ought to do so.

... is “fully general.”

That is, they don't yield verdicts for *all possible actions*.

*Fully general* principles do.

# Fully General Moral Principles

Fully general moral principles purport to explain, for any possible action, why it has the moral status it has.

They often take this form:

an action is morally right if and only if \_\_\_\_\_.

This is a statement of the *necessary and sufficient conditions* for an act's being morally right.

We can call such principles 'moral theories'.

# Moral Theories

A sample moral theory:

10C: an act is morally right if and only if it does not violate any of the Ten Commandments.

This theory is saying two things:

- (1) that any act that *doesn't* violate the Ten Commandments is *right* -- it's ok to do those.
- (2) that any act that *does* violate the Ten Commandments is *not right* -- it's wrong to do those.

# The Normative Ethics of Behavior

*The* fundamental project of the normative ethics of behavior is to discover a theory like this -- a statement of the necessary and sufficient conditions for an act's being morally right.

# Moral Theories

A couple more sample theories:

- 10C: an act is morally right if and only if it does not violate any of the Ten Commandments.
- GR: an act is morally right if and only if the agent of the act, in performing the act, treats others as he or she would like to be treated.

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<http://www.uhj.net/the-golden-rule.html>

“Zi Gong asked, saying, ‘Is there one word that may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?’ The Master said, ‘Is not *reciprocity* such a word?’”

– Confucius

# Moral Theories

A couple more sample theories:

**10C:** an act is morally right if and only if it does not violate any of the Ten Commandments.

**GR:** an act is morally right if and only if the agent of the act, in performing the act, treats others as he or she would like to be treated.

**GHP:** an act is morally right if and only if it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

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“At the age of fourteen I became convinced that the fundamental principle of ethics should be the promotion of human happiness, and at first this appeared to me so self-evident that I supposed it must be the universal opinion. Then I discovered, to my surprise, that it was a view regarded as unorthodox, and called Utilitarianism. I announced, no doubt with a certain pleasure in the long word, that I was a Utilitarian; but the announcement was received with derision.”

— Bertrand Russell

“My Religious Reminiscences”



# Refuting Moral Theories

To show that some proposed moral theory is not the correct moral theory, one thing we can do is produce a *counterexample* to the theory.

**A counterexample** is an example that runs counter to a generalization, and thus proves it to be false.

For example, consider this generalization:

*All college students love Miley Cyrus.*

# Refuting Moral Theories

Let's try to refute

I0C: an act is morally right if and only if it does not violate any of the Ten Commandments.

by coming up with a counterexample to it.

A counterexample to I0C will be an example (it can be an imaginary one), involving some action, in which: *either* the act is obviously wrong but I0C implies that it is right *or* the act is obviously right but I0C implies that it is wrong.

# Refuting Moral Theories

What about ...

GR: an act is morally right if and only if the agent of the act, in performing the act, treats others as he or she would like to be treated.

*Are there any counterexamples to GR?*