



UNIVERSITÄT  
BAYREUTH

# Introduction

## Ethics

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University of Bayreuth, Summer 2025

## 2 Today

- I. Course Overview
- II. What is Ethics?
- III. A Primer on Moral Language
- IV. An Example of Moral Reasoning: Trolley Cases
- V. The Independence of Ethics: Is and Ought

# Course Overview

## 4 Aims and Approach

- This course **systematically** examines **contemporary Western analytic** ethics
  - Systematic: focussed on questions rather than thinkers
  - Contemporary: no attempt to explain the history of ethics
  - Analytic: to be broadly distinguished from ‘continental’ philosophy
- In the tutorials, you will also read some **classical texts** in Western ethics
- Materials are distributed via the ELearning platform

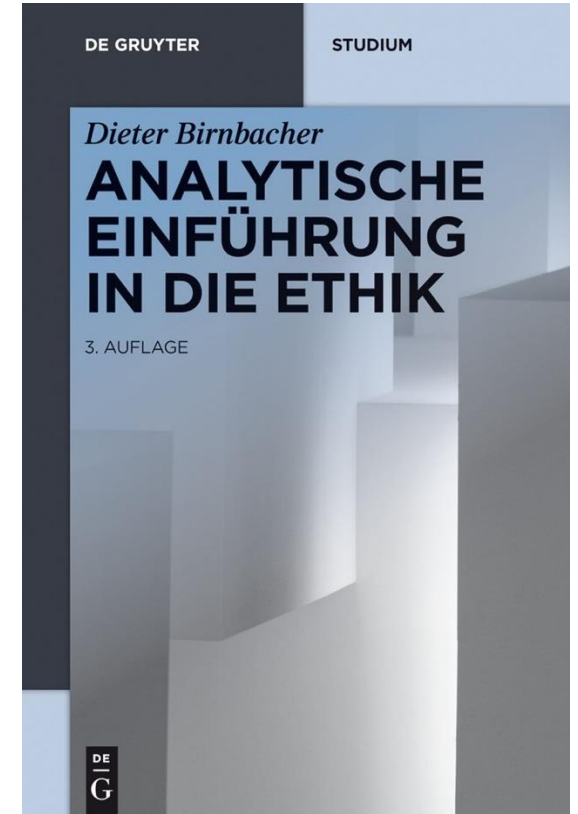
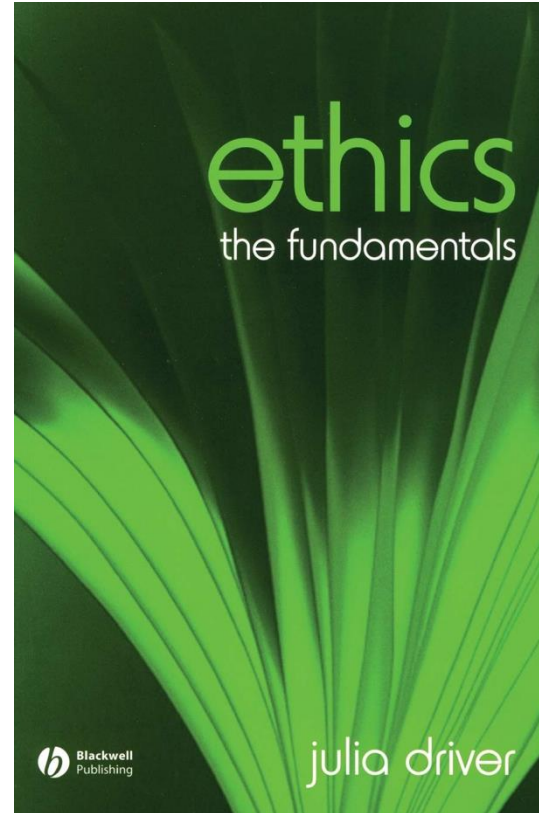
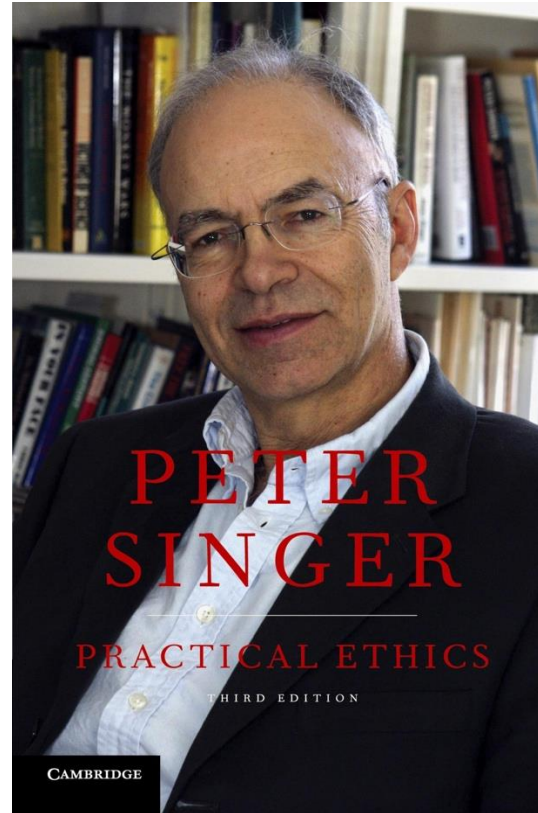
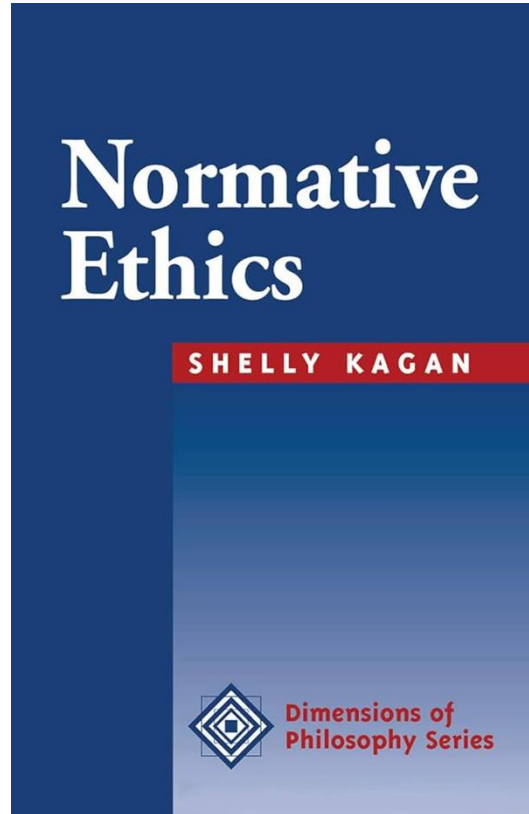
# 5 Final Exam

- Duration: 2 hours
- The exam will have two parts, both weighed equally
  - Part A: answer 5 out of 8 questions, focus: understanding of material
  - Part B: answer 1 out of 6 questions, focus: critical thinking
- There will be a **practice exam** towards the end of term

# 6 Tutorials

- Miriam Schmidt ([miriam.schmidt@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:miriam.schmidt@uni-bayreuth.de)),  
Wednesday 12-14, S 136 (NW III)
- Simon Schuimer ([simon.schuimer@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:simon.schuimer@uni-bayreuth.de)),  
Monday 12-14, S 138 (NW III)
- Reasons to attend tutorials
  - Discuss primary texts which will be covered in exam's part B
  - Clarify questions from lectures and deepen understanding
  - Give feedback and influence exam topics

## 7 Literature Recommendations



# What is Ethics?



## 9 Descriptive versus Philosophical Ethics

- **Ethics** is a subdiscipline of philosophy, **morality** is what it investigates
  - Analogy: entomology is the study of bugs
  - So don't say 'X is ethical'—this is like saying 'a mosquito is entomological'
- Descriptive ethics **observes** what the actually existing moral norms are
  - What do people actually consider to be moral? What are the accepted norms in a society?
  - Descriptive ethics belongs to the social sciences—anthropology, sociology, etc.
- Philosophical ethics **evaluates** norms: what are the norms that we **ought to** adopt?

# 10 Three Subareas of Philosophical Ethics

## Applied Ethics

Who should pay for the costs of climate change mitigation?  
Is death bad, and why?

Gives answers concerning concrete moral issues

## Normative Ethics

When is an action morally right?  
What is the connection between virtue and goodness?

Provides general theories of ethics

## Metaethics

Are moral sentences true or false?  
Can we gain reliable knowledge concerning moral claims?

Investigates the nature of morality on a meta-level

# 11 Lecture Plan

29.04.	1. Introduction
	<b>Part I: Normative Ethics</b>
06.05.	2. Welfare
13.05.	3. Utilitarianism
20.05.	4. Deontological Ethics
27.05.	5. Virtue Ethics
	<b>Part II: Applied Ethics</b>
03.06.	6. Autonomy and Consent
10.06.	No course Whit Tuesday

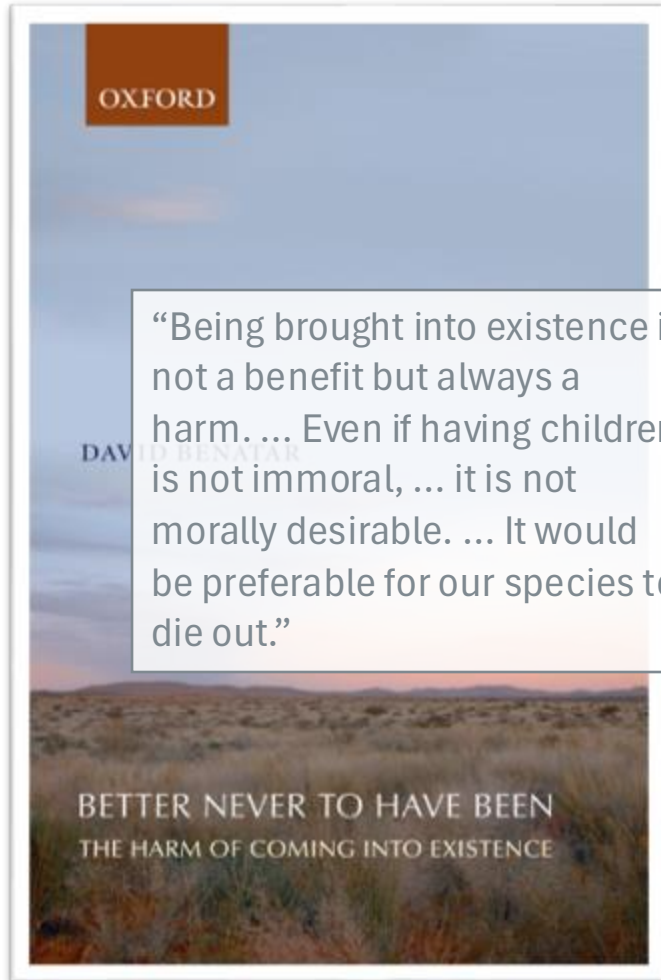
17.06.	7. Moral Status: Animals, the Future, and AI
24.06.	No course Wittgenstein Lectures
01.07.	8. Collective Obligations
	<b>Part III: Metaethics</b>
08.07.	9. Subjectivism
15.07.	10. Objectivism
22.07.	11. Moral Epistemology

# 12 Approaching Ethical Topics

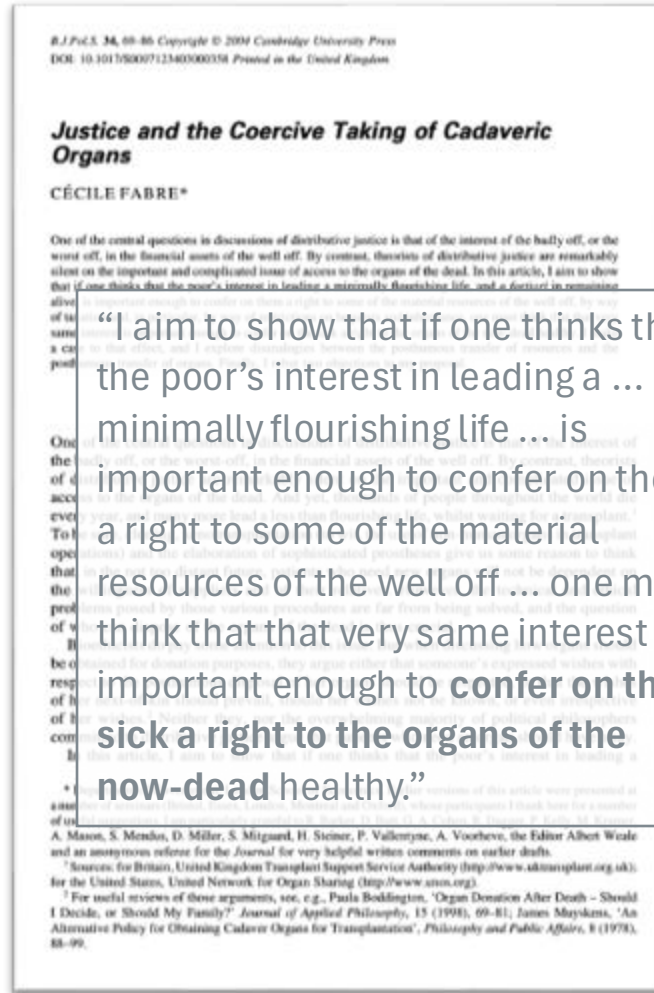
In ethics, we aim to **rationally investigate** morality. This implies:

- We aim to make **arguments**, not merely state our opinions or appeal to authority
- We try to be **analytically precise**; language is a tool for this purpose
- No topic or claim is **off limits** or ‘taboo’
- We approach the topics in an **open-ended way**: we don’t prejudge the results, and consider issues from all sides
- **Respect** is crucial: we do not argue against another person, but against another argument

# 13 Controversial Moral Stances



“Being brought into existence is not a benefit but always a harm. ... Even if having children is not immoral, ... it is not morally desirable. ... It would be preferable for our species to die out.”



“I aim to show that if one thinks that the poor’s interest in leading a ... minimally flourishing life ... is important enough to confer on them a right to some of the material resources of the well off ... one must think that that very same interest is important enough to confer on the sick a right to the organs of the now-dead healthy.”



“... there are decisive reasons to aid animals in nature.”

## Warm-Up Questions

- What expectations or wishes do you have for the course?
- Are there specific moral questions or controversies you are interested in?

# A Primer on Moral Language

# 16 Examples of Moral Language

- Murder is wrong
- Pain is bad
- People should be allowed to drink alcohol in public
- You're so generous!
- Everyone has a right to say their opinion freely
- It's good that untouched nature still exists
- You ought to apologise
- You have a duty to say the truth
- Edward Snowden is a hero
- ISIS is barbaric



# 17 Objects of Moral Language

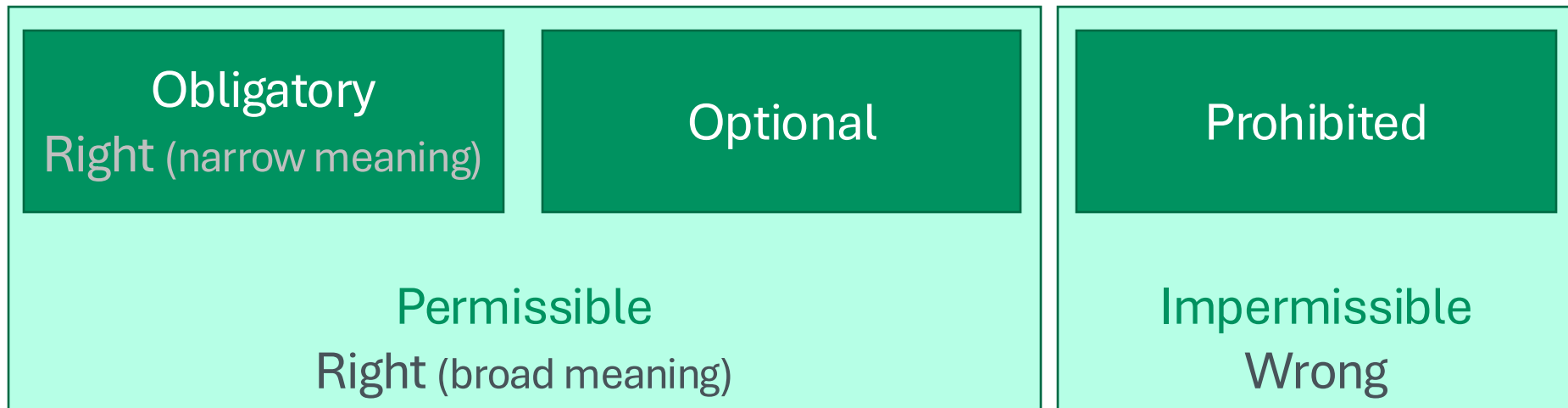
We can sort these expressions according to **which objects** they are about:

- States of Affairs
  - it's good that untouched nature still exists
  - pain (= that people are in pain) is bad
- Actions
  - murder is wrong
  - drinking in public should be allowed
  - you have a duty to say the truth
- Agents
  - Edward Snowden acted heroically
  - you're so generous

# 18 Deontic Terms

Ethics has precise language to describe the **deontic status** of **actions**.

We might say that an **action is ...**



# 19 Normative and Evaluative Language

## Normative

**Action-guiding:** aimed towards telling an agent how they should act

Examples: ought, must, should, have reason to, duty, obligation

## Evaluative

**Expressing a judgment** of approval or disapproval: aimed towards telling an agent how they should feel, think, etc.

Examples: good, bad, excellent, awful, heroic, generous, evil

## 20 Moral and Non-Moral Language

	Normative	Evaluative
Moral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You ought not to torture cats</li><li>• It's wrong to break a promise</li><li>• It's permissible to lie to a dictator</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pain is bad</li><li>• It's good that untouched nature still exists</li></ul>
Non-Moral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I ought to do something about my balding</li><li>• If we want to be there on time, we should leave now</li><li>• You have a reason to get drunk!</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This is a good knife</li><li>• What a nice sunset!</li><li>• Apples taste good</li></ul>

# 21 Directed and Undirected Language

## Undirected Language

- X doing A was wrong
- X has a duty to do A
- It is right that X did A
- X ought to to A

One agent (X) and an action (A)

## Directed (or: Relational) Language

- X wronged **Y** in doing A
- X has a duty **to Y** to do A
- X has **a right against Y** to do A
- X **owes** it **to Y** to do A

Two (or more) agents (X and Y) and an action (A)

# 22 The Importance of Moral Language

## Why make all these fine-grained distinctions?

- Because we are making different types of claims!
- It is a difficult, open philosophical question how these different categories interact
- The first lesson for becoming an ethicist (and doing well on exams...): be clear with your moral language
  - What is the **object** we are evaluating?
  - What is the **moral category** in which we are evaluating it?
  - Is the language evaluative or normative, moral or non-moral, undirected or directed?
  - If we evaluate something in this moral category, does it entail anything about other categories?  
Could there be several, logically independent claims?

## Exercise

- Can an action be permissible, but its outcomes bad?
- Is there something which it would be good to do, but you have no duty to do it?
- Can the outcome of an action be good, but you ought not to do it?
- Can an agent be virtuous, but do wrong things?
- Can people have a right to do wrong?
- Is it always wrong to wrong someone?

# An Example of Moral Reasoning

## **The Trolley Problem**



## 25 Foot's Original Problem

**TROLLEY DRIVER:** you are the driver of a train. If you pull a lever and divert your train, you will kill one person. If you do **not** pull the lever, your train will kill five people.

Foot's Claim: it is **permissible** to kill the one person.

**TRANSPLANT:** you are a surgeon. You can kill one person and give their organs to five other people. If you do **not** kill the one person, the other five people will die.

Foot's Claim: it is **impermissible** to kill the one person.

What explains the difference between the two cases?

Philippa Foot (1920-2010)

## 26 Foot's Hypothesis

1. In **TROLLEY DRIVER**, the choice is between **killing one person** and **killing five people**
2. In **TRANSPLANT**, the choice is between **killing one person** and **letting five people die**

Foot offers the following hypotheses:

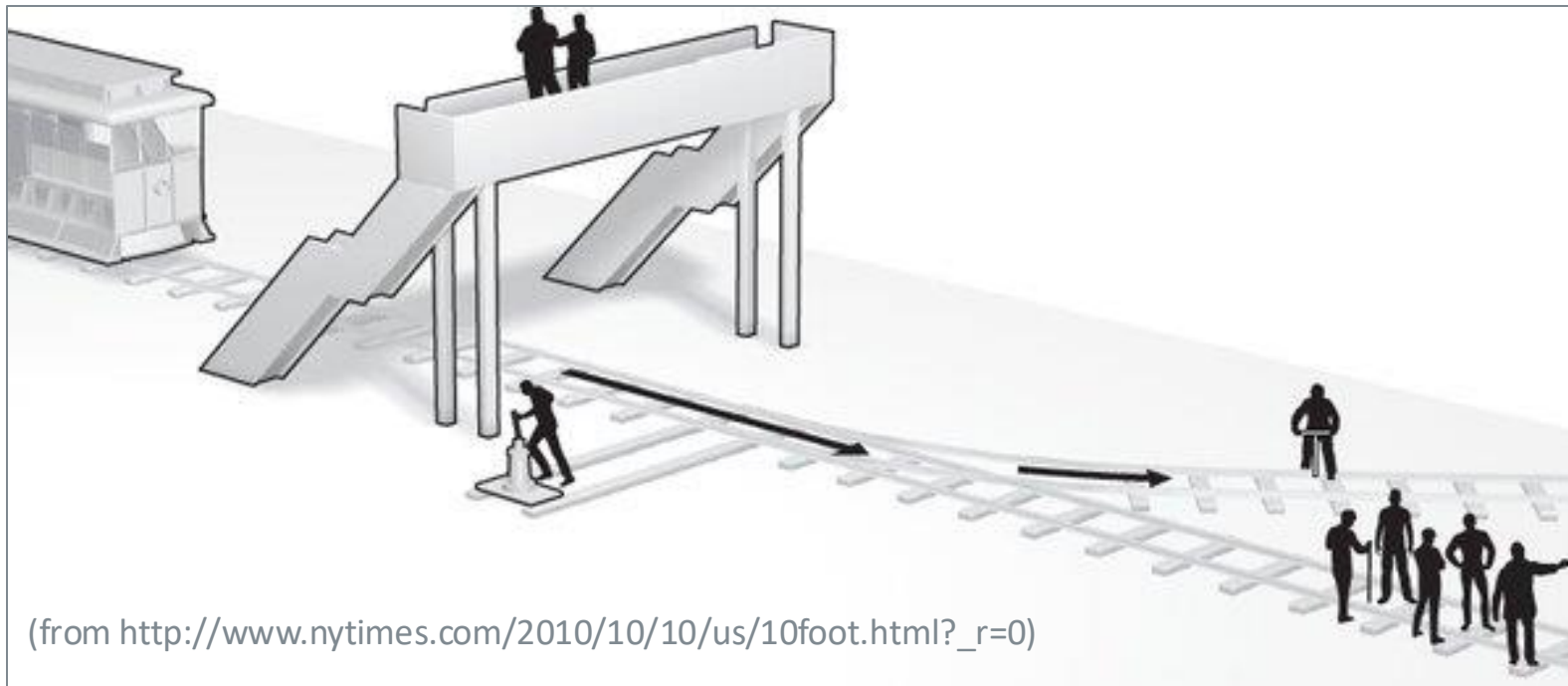
- I. Killing one person is worse than letting five people die
- II. Killing five persons is worse than killing one person

If principles I and II are correct, then we can explain why it is permissible to kill in **TROLLEY DRIVER** but impermissible to kill in **TRANSPLANT**

## 27 Thomson's Objection

**BYSTANDER:** You are a bystander observing a train moving towards five people. If you do nothing, the five people will die. If you pull a lever, the train is diverted and kills one person; the five people will be saved.

Thomson's Claim: it is **permissible** to kill the one person in **BYSTANDER**.



(from [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/us/10foot.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/us/10foot.html?_r=0))

## 28 Thomson's Objection

1. In TRANSPLANT, the choice is between **killing one person** and **letting five people die**
2. In TRANSPLANT, it is **impermissible** to kill the one person
3. In BYSTANDER, the choice is between **killing one person** and **letting five people die**
4. In BYSTANDER, it is **permissible** to kill the one person

Foot's Principle I cannot explain the difference between TRANSPLANT and BYSTANDER

## 29 ... it doesn't stop here

### The Trolley Problem

Judith Jarvis Thomson†

#### I.

Some years ago, Philippa Foot drew attention to an extraordinarily interesting problem.<sup>1</sup> Suppose you are the driver of a trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don't work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. Unfortunately, Mrs. Foot has arranged that there is one track workman on that spur of track. He can no more get off the track in time than the five can, so you will kill him if you turn the trolley onto him. Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley?

Everybody to whom I have put this hypothetical case says, Yes, it is.<sup>2</sup> Some people say something stronger than that it is morally *permissible* for you to turn the trolley: They say that morally speaking, you *must* turn it—that morality requires you to do so. Others do not agree that morality

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† Professor of Philosophy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. B.A., Barnard College 1950, Cambridge University 1952; M.A., Cambridge University 1956; Ph.D., Columbia University 1959. Many people have given me helpful criticism of this essay's many successive reincarnations over the

Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929-2020)

## 30 Features of Foot's and Thomson's Disagreement

- Foot and Thomson assume that **rational argument** about morality is possible: whether you agree with their argument is not a subjective question of taste
- They do **not** rely on any **empirical evidence** concerning what people think concerning their cases, how people would decide, what the law would say, etc.
- They assume that **general principles** of morality can be discovered: the resulting principles are not bound to a specific time, culture, or context
- They think we can learn from **thought experiments** even if they are purely hypothetical
- They **appeal to intuitions**: they implicitly think that others will share their judgments concerning these cases

# The Independence of Ethics **Is and Ought**

## 32 Hume's Claim

In every system of morality ... the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it's necessary ... that a reason should be given ... how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.

(Hume, *Treatise* 3.1.1.27)



## 33 Hume's Law

On one interpretation\*, Hume advocates

**HUME'S LAW.** We cannot derive an 'Ought (not)' from premises which merely contain 'Is (not)'

More broadly, we cannot derive any moral conclusions from premises which are purely non-moral

(\* It is not clear whether Hume meant to defend something as strong as a law here)

## 34 Is—Ought gap: Examples (I)

P1. Torturing babies serves no purposes and is cruel

Therefore,

C. It is morally wrong to torture babies

- This argument is **invalid**: it falsely infers an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’
  - Note: invalid/unsound arguments can have true conclusions!
- The argument has an **implicit premise**:
  - P2. If something serves no purpose and is cruel, then doing it is morally wrong
- If we add P2, we no longer infer an ‘Ought’ **only** from ‘Is’

## 35 Is—Ought gap: Examples (II)

P1. People universally disapprove of incest

Therefore,

C. Incest is morally wrong

- This argument is **invalid**: it falsely infers an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’
- For the argument to be valid, we would need the following bridging principle,  
P2. If people universally disapprove of A, then it is morally wrong to A
- But P2 is not true in general
  - Again, remember that the conclusion of an argument might be right even if the argument itself is unsound!

## 36 Is—Ought gap: Examples (III)

P1. Homosexuality is unnatural

Therefore,

C. It is morally wrong to engage in homosexuality

- This argument is **invalid**: it falsely infers an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’
- For the argument to work, we would need the following bridging principle,  
P2. If something is unnatural, then engaging in it is morally wrong
- P2 is false. It commits the ‘**naturalistic fallacy**’: inferring moral claims from claims about nature

# 37 The Naturalistic Fallacy

P1. Homosexuality is unnatural

P2. If something is unnatural, then engaging in it is morally wrong

Therefore,

C. It is morally wrong to engage in homosexuality

- If 'natural' = 'statistically average or common', then ...
  - P2 is false: It is not morally wrong to do things which are uncommon (e.g., be a philosopher)
- If 'natural' = 'biologically innate', then ...
  - P1 is false: there is evidence that homosexuality has a heavy genetic component
  - P2 is false: it is not morally wrong to do things which are not biologically innate (e.g., take insulin)
- If 'natural' = 'can be found in untouched nature' or 'not created by humans', then ...
  - P1 is false: There is lots of homosexuality in animals
  - P2 is false: Glasses are created by humans, but it is not wrong to wear them

## 38 Is—Ought gap: Examples (IV)

P1. God commands that we love our neighbours

Therefore,

C. We should love our neighbours

- This argument relies on an intermediate premise like  
P2. We should do what God commands
- Assume that P2 is right. But does God's command **explain** why we should love our neighbours?

## 39 Plato's *Euthyphro* Dilemma

The two horns of the dilemma are as follows:

1. God commands what is morally good **because** it is morally good  
On this option, we do not really need God's commands: what is morally good is good independent from God
2. What is morally good is morally good **because** God commands it  
But why should we do what someone arbitrarily wills? Would this not reduce morality to blind obedience? We cannot respond that God is perfectly good, because then we are back at option 1.

## 40 Upshots

- There does not seem to be a direct way to derive moral from non-moral claims
  - This does mean that we **cannot** derive moral claims **directly** from the sciences, from anthropology, sociology, economics, law, religion, descriptive ethics, ...
  - Ethics is an **independent** discipline, it is **not** reducible to some social or natural science
  - This does **not** mean that the results from these disciplines are not morally relevant
- For example, consider the following (valid) argument,
  - P1. We should adopt the economic system that maximises general welfare
  - P2. Capitalism maximises general welfare
  - Therefore,
  - C. We should adopt capitalism
- No amount of empirical evidence can tell us whether P1 is true;  
but also: no amount of moral evidence can tell us whether P2 is true