



# Thinking about Ethics

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# Aims

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Introduction to ethics and ethical reasoning

Framework, structure

- Not answers about right and wrong – but a start at how we reason about right and wrong
- For understanding what you hear from speakers and in approaching your discussions in the coming weeks

Strategy:

- The ordinariness of ethics – ordinariness of ethical reasoning
- Trying to ‘slowing’ down what we ordinarily do and laying it out

# What should I do?

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The kinds of things that we consider:

- What our options are
- The people involved
- We normally have a general sense of the things that matter to us

With all of this considered:

- We weigh-up or we judge
- we consider the consequences of our various options, we consider what matters

We make a decision about what to do

- about what we ought to do, about what is best

# A very ordinary example

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I have agreed to meet a friend for coffee after work but as I leave the office a junior co-worker stops to ask my advice about a task that she is finding difficult and needs to finish that night before she can leave. I don't have time to get in touch with my friend and in any case I cancelled the previous coffee meeting and was very late to the one before that. My co-worker is worried about completing this task and depends on me for advice on things like this. Stopping to provide proper help will make me very late.

What should I do?

# What should I do?

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Two key points

- i. I want to get it right
  - It matters that what I do is justified and appropriate
  - This makes a difference to how I see the situation
- ii. How would I go about deciding what to do?
  - (As we saw above)
  - Alternatives, courses of action, promises, commitments Expectations and relationships
  - Systematic, piece by piece
  - Then step back to see the whole again

# What should he/she do?

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A different kind of question

- Similarities: options available to the other person, commitments etc.
- Differences: we don't know what the other person is thinking or the elements of the situation that matter to them
- Example – my friend, my friend's friend, another co-worker, an outsider...This makes a difference to how I see the situation

# What should he/she do?

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Two key points

- i. Uncertainty – we aren't very good at knowing what others are thinking and feeling
- ii. Protecting against uncertainty – by imagining how others would respond to our reasoning we can check perspectives and try to ensure that we have included other ways of thinking

# Ethics and law

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What should the policy be? What should the law be?

- A different set of considerations
- A population level question
- The content does not involve a specific case but all effected
- The role of policy: expressive not just preventative
- Exceptions?

Example: What should the doctor do when the patient wants the doctor to end the suffering?

# Ethics and law

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What should the policy be? What should the law be?

- The law and individual ethics decisions can pull in different ways
- This might be partly about their different functions
- There is definitely ethical questions associated with making laws
- But they operate at the level of society

# Reasons and reason-giving

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How do we go about reasoning?

- We consider each reason on its own merits
- Looking for the 'best', 'strongest' or the 'right' one
- We try out justifications – justifying each course of action
  
- How might I reason in the earlier example?

# A very ordinary example

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On the one hand, I did **promise** my friend, and I **haven't treated him very well** of late. He is likely to be at the café on time – he's a **punctual kind of person**. I **value our friendship** very highly – it is a long standing one and has always been an important part of my life. On the other hand, my co-worker is quite **stressed** and does feel under pressure. She is an important member of the team and **relies on my advice** to help get her over these little bumps. Her dependence on my help is not ideal but it is part of **my role** and I can make a difference here.

# A very ordinary example

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So I decide that I should stay and help my co-worker. I think this because I think that I **owe** her the support and encouragement that she needs here and now. Her position is uncertain – she feels **vulnerable** and under pressure – and these are things that I can help to manage. When I think about my friend, I am aware that he might think that I no longer value our friendship but I do think that I can **explain** it to him and make it up to him. I think that **friendship, our friendship, is the kind of thing that is both resilient and forgiving**. I think that he will understand.

# Reasons and reason-giving

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- These are sketches of a set of reasons that can help justify my action

Whether someone agrees will depend on:

- i. Their accepting my reasons and my justification
  - ii. How they interpret the situation
  - iii. Their counter-reasons
  - iv. Their criticisms of my reasons and the significance of them
- My justification is the beginnings of an argument

# Reasons and reason-giving

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How does reason-giving work?

- Reasons justify my decision, they provide an argument for it
- The standards of justification come from the activity of reasoning with others
- They are public standards in a sense – giving an account involves making reference (perhaps imagined) to the responses and reasoning of others
- We are not aiming at something that is just good enough for us when we reason
- We are aiming at a justification that applies generally (universally?), to all those who are interested in finding answer

# Concluding points

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Four final points:

- Reasons and justification – the standards are ‘public’ in an important sense
- Policy and law – the context is societal but the reasons function in the same way
- Disagreement – people will disagree even when genuinely trying to find an answer to an ethical problem
- Reason-giving and argument – are our way through disagreement, they give us the best chance of getting it right when a decision must be made