Ethics
A unit of work in TOK

Using Ethical Theories to explore real-life situations, case studies and examples in the options and areas of knowledge

KOGNITY

Why Ethics in ToK?

From the ToK Curriculum Review 2019:

«There was strong support among the review team for making engagement with ethics compulsory, particularly given the mission of the IB. However, it was felt that the most effective way to engage students with ethics in TOK would be to infuse it throughout the course..It is hoped that this change will increase engagement with ethics, by making it a high-profile compulsory part of all elements of the course. »

From the ToK Transition Support Material

«Compulsory engagement with ethics: This is a shift from having ethics as a standalone optional area of knowledge to having ethics as a requirement within every part of the course. This makes ethics compulsory for all students.»

From the ToK Guide p.13

«It is crucial that TOK discussions about ethics focus on the knowledge questions that are woven into, and implied, in the ethical issues being discussed, rather than the focus being on debating the ethical issues themselves.»

What *is* Ethics..and what is it *not*?

As we just saw,

> *"It is crucial that TOK discussions about ethics focus on the **knowledge questions that are woven into, and implied, in the ethical issues being discussed**, rather than the focus being on debating the ethical issues themselves."* (p.13).

It is important then that discussions about examples, real-life situations and case studies focus on

the **systematization of principles (*HOW can we decide WHAT to do?*)**

rather than on whether example/RLS/case study X does or does not adhere to

"a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion or culture," (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

i.e. making **moral judgements** about the **rightness or wrongness** of an action.

Three Major Ethical Theories

We will consider three of the main ethical theories as the basis for this unit of work:

Deontological ethics

Consequentialist ethics

Ethical relativism

A Brief Overview of Deontological Ethics

Deontological ethics makes a distinction between

Categorical (moral) imperatives and Hypothetical (instrumental/practical) imperatives

Categorical imperatives are objectively true, and **can be deduced rationally through three 'tests':**

universalizability

(can we 'imagine' everyone, everywhere, consistently behaving in this way without giving rise to fundamental tensions?);

'ends-in-themselves'

(does the imperative respect the moral autonomy of each and every individual?);

reciprocity

(i.e. the doctrine of equal consideration of moral agents – does the imperative treat each and every affected person equally?).

David Hume's Fact/Value distinction (a.k.a. The 'is/ought gap')

The **fact–value distinction** (or **'is/ought gap'**) is a fundamental distinction between:

> **Statements of fact** ('positive' or 'descriptive' statements) based upon reason and observation, and which are examined via the empirical method,
>
> and
>
> **Statements of value** ('normative' or 'prescriptive' statements) which ethics deals with.

This **is–ought problem** states that many people make claims about what *ought* to be the case that are based solely on statements about what *is* the case. Hume stated that there is a significant difference between positive statements (describing what *is* the case) and prescriptive or normative statements (about what *ought to be* the case), and that it is not obvious how it is possible to move from descriptive statements of fact to prescriptive statements of value about what *should* be the case. He argued that if someone only has access to descriptions of fact, it is not possible to infer from these the truth of moral statements.

John Rawls' 'Veil of Ignorance'

Imagine you are asked to create a brand new set of classroom rules, or school rules, or rules governing an association, or a community...or even a whole country. The "veil of ignorance" is a method for testing whether or not those rules are equitable, just, and fair.

The thought experiment assumes that we have enough information to know the consequences of our possible decisions for everyone but we do not know, or do not take into account, what role we would be adopting. For example, if we were creating a set of school rules, when creating these rules we do not know whether we will end up as the Head teacher, a student, a janitor, the business manager: in short, we do not know how the new rules may end up affecting us personally, so it is in our best interests, and the best interests of everyone, to ensure that the rules are as equitable, just and fair to everyone as is possible.
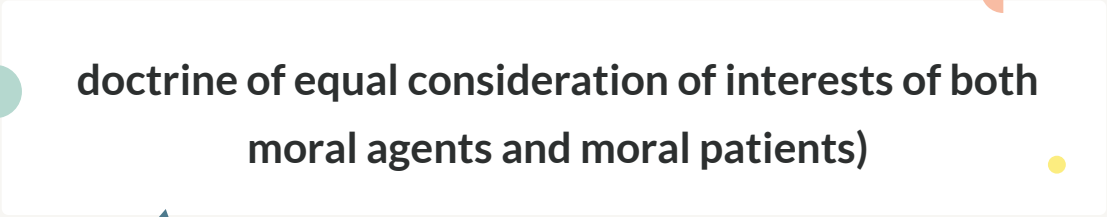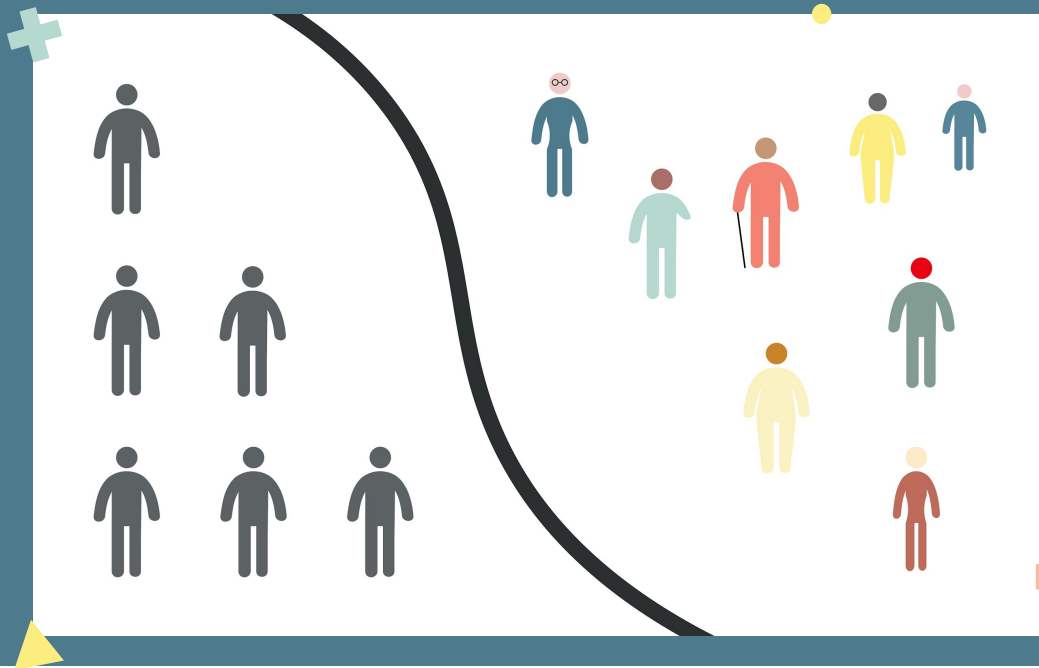
Symbolic depiction of Rawls's veil of ignorance. The citizens making the choices about their society make them from an "original position" of equality and ignorance *(left)*, without knowing what gender, race, abilities, tastes, wealth, or position in society they will have *(right)*. Rawls claims this ensures they will choose a just society.

A Brief Overview of Consequentialist Ethics

For consequentialist ethics, it is **consequences, <u>not</u> intentions**, that are important when trying to judge whether actions to be taken are right or wrong.

Similarly, consequentialists consider **interests** to be more important than **rights.**

In trying to come to conclusions regarding the morality of any proposed actions, the theory takes into account both **moral standing** and **moral interests,** i.e., the

doctrine of equal consideration of interests of both moral agents and moral patients)

The main 'branch' of teleological ethics is **UTILITARIANISM**,
and is based on two main principles:

the Greatest Happiness Principle

("the greatest happiness of the greatest number which states "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."

**the Felicific Calculus
(or principle of utility)**

which looks at a variety of **probable future consequences** of an action to determine its rightness or wrongness.

To be included in this calculation are several **variables** which Bentham called **"circumstances"**. These are:

Intensity:

How *strong* is the pleasure?

Duration:

How *long* will the pleasure last?

Certainty:

How *likely* or *unlikely* is it that the pleasure will occur?

Remoteness:

How *soon* will the pleasure occur?

Fecundity:

The probability that the action *will be followed* by sensations of the same kind.

Purity:

The probability that it will *not be followed* by sensations of the opposite kind.

Extent:

How many people will be affected?

Environmental and 'animal rights' philosophers (e.g. Peter Singer) like consequentialism because it **extends the principle of equal consideration beyond the scope of the human**. Because animals or ecosystems, for example, have **interests**, but have neither rights nor the ability to express those rights, the doctrine of equal consideration of interests of both moral agents and moral patients means that **those interests 'count' equally alongside the interests of those – like we humans – who are able to articulate our interests.** Singer adheres to a more sophisticated version of utilitarianism, known as **preference utilitarianism**, where actions are not judged on their simple pain-and-pleasure outcome, but on **how they affect the interests, the preferences, of anyone involved.**

A Brief Overview of Ethical Relativism

Ethical relativism is the view that

moral judgements are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint

and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. This involves also

- the thesis that **different cultures often exhibit radically different moral values;**
- the **denial that there are universal moral values** shared by every human society;
- the **insistence that we should refrain from passing moral judgments** on beliefs and practices characteristic of cultures other than our own.

- Ethical relativists take **Hume's fact-value distinction (the 'is/ought gap')** to be fundamental.

- There is a **crucial distinction** to be made between *descriptive* and *normative* **(rule-making) relativism**. Descriptive relativism does not necessarily have to lead to normative relativism.

- **Ritual practice does not equate to ethical principle** (as Richard Holloway elaborated in 'Godless Morality'). The existence of different **practices** concerned with, for example, burial/cremation and the treatment of the dead does not automatically indicate that these reflect different ethical principles.

Ethics as a Unit of Work in ToK – Real-Life Situations & Knowledge Questions

As we have seen,

> *"It is crucial that TOK discussions about ethics focus on the **knowledge questions that are woven into, and implied, in the ethical issues being discussed**, rather than the focus being on debating the ethical issues themselves."* (p.13).

Considering the various ethical theories is best done, then, through the lens of specific knowledge questions in relation to concrete real-life situations or stimuli, so that we can see how, ***depending on the ethical theory we choose,* different perspectives allow us to reach very different conclusions.**

Optional Theme/Area of Knowledge	Knowledge Question	Real-Life Situation/Stimulus	Possible Deontological Response	Possible Consequentialist Response	Possible Ethical Relativist Response
	Do you use different criteria to make ethical decisions in online environments compared to in the physical world?	MIT's Moral Machine: Moral decisions made by machine intelligences **Click here →**			
	Is there knowledge that a person or society has a responsibility to acquire or not to acquire?	The United Nations' Global Goals for Sustainable Development **Click here →**			
	Are there responsibilities that necessarily come with knowing something or misused and distorted by people for their own ends?	Charitable Giving **Click here →**			

Optional Theme/Area of Knowledge	Knowledge Question	Real-Life Situation/Stimulus	Possible Deontological Response	Possible Consequentialist Response	Possible Ethical Relativist Response
The Arts	On what criteria could it be decided if the state has the right to censor art that is deemed immoral or blasphemous?	'Immersion (Piss Christ)' by Andrés Serrano **Click here →** **Click here →**			
Human Sciences	Is the role of the human scientist only to describe what the case is or also to make judgements about what should be the case?	How can post-covid ghost cities be avoided? **Click here →**			
Natural Sciences	Do scientists or the societies in which scientists operate exert a greater influence	'Following the science': Covid-19 and political decision-making			

Optional Theme/Area of Knowledge	Knowledge Question	Real-Life Situation/Stimulus	Possible Deontological Response	Possible Consequentialist Response	Possible Ethical Relativist Response
	Do you use different criteria to make ethical decisions in online environments compared to in the physical world?	MIT's Moral Machine: Moral decisions made by machine intelligences **Click here →**	Key here will be whether or not the decisions taken by the self-driving car, the decisions programmed into it to take, will respect the moral autonomy of each and every road user (passengers, pedestrians, etc.). If it does not — if preference is given to certain characteristics over others — a deontologist would argue that, whereas in the 'real world' we are more likely to respect moral autonomy, when playing out the scenarios in the online environment we are more likely to disrespect the principle of moral autonomy.	A preference utilitarian might argue that whether or not we do or do not use different criteria, we should not, since the interests of every road user count differently, irrespective of whether we are making these decisions in 'the real world' or in the online environment of an AI. However, in the 'real world' we are more likely to pay more attention to the amount of people affected by the decisions/actions of a self-driving vehicle, whereas in an online environment we are more likely to count each of the 'variables' equally.	Given that ethical relativists take Hume's 'fact/value distinction' to be axiomatic, the answer might be fairly straightforward: we use different criteria in the physical world because that is the world we exist in, populated by people we care for (and those we do not) whilst an online environment allows us to 'test out' a variety of approaches with no real consequences.

Optional Theme/Area of Knowledge	Knowledge Question	Real-Life Situation/Stimulus	Possible Deontological Response	Possible Consequentialist Response	Possible Ethical Relativist Response
Human Sciences	Is the role of the human scientist only to describe what the case is or also to make judgements about what should be the case?	How can post-covid ghost cities be avoided? **Click here →** *(ESS, Geography)*	The human scientist involved in this study were presenting a number of visions about how future urban environments should be in order to overcome the negative effects identified in the various studies undertaken. Clearly, then, there is a case for arguing that human scientists make ethical judgements about what should be the case, although these are hypothetical rather than categorical imperatives, because the studies undertaken concern the effectiveness and practicability of such urban environments.	The consequentialist would agree that it is also the role of the human scientist to make judgements about what should be the case rather than simply to describe. Economists, Psychologist etc. base these ethical judgements on what has been accurately described, but the purpose of description is only to ascertain the facts, but what human societies do with those facts is then a matter of ethical judgement, especially when it comes to 'calculating' the probable future consequences of social policy, and whether these are more or less likely to lead to human (and environmental) flourishing.	The ethical relativist makes it clear that we cannot and should not go beyond descriptive relativism: the human scientists can describe how and why 'ghost cities' have occurred — although even this is problematic because there is likely to be some element of interpretation mixed in with the description of facts. However, the 'prohibition' on making ethical judgements about the lives of others means that their answer to this knowledge question would be quite clear.