

Discussion Activity

What counts as cause?

A man has a heart attack while jogging. The following pieces of information are available. On a sheet of paper, diagram the causes: draw an arrow from each fact back to its cause. Then answer the question: What is the cause of his heart attack?



- 1 He was given a new pair of jogging shoes for his birthday and wanted to try them.
- 2 He had eaten far too much (far, far too much) during the previous week.
- 3 He has always loved chocolate cake, and cannot resist second, third, or fourth helpings.
- 4 As a child, he had associated his mother's chocolate cake with approval, since she had rewarded him with extra pieces if he had done well.
- 5 He loves his mother.
- 6 Poor jogging shoes have in the past made his shins ache.
- 7 He frequently makes new starts, with fresh resolutions for the future.
- 8 He likes a sporty image.
- 9 He would like his wife to think of him as a thwarted athlete who, under other circumstances, might have been of Olympic quality!
- 10 He was pleased that his wife had given him a sporty present for his birthday.
- 11 The road he was jogging on was hilly.
- 12 He is 57 years old.
- 13 Although basically fit, he has not jogged for six weeks because of an injury to his Achilles tendon.
- 14 When he was 13, he had won a trophy for being the best runner in his age group in the surrounding region, and still thinks of that prize as a special achievement.
- 15 His father had been admired for his skill in tennis.
- 16 His mother admired athletic ability.
- 17 His mother married his father.
- 18 He was born.
- 19 He had jogged 12 kilometres when he had his heart attack.
- 20 He had decided to go jogging at that particular moment because his wife and son were fiercely arguing politics.



16. Ethics

As we examine ethics in TOK, we will not be *studying* ethics any more than we *study* sciences or the arts when we discuss them as areas of knowledge; we will not be making or arguing for the knowledge claims of the field except to see how arguments are made and how they are justified, and to consider their implications for other knowledge and potential action.

The moral judgments you may reach yourself are only the raw material here for your further reflection. We ask you to bring your views into discussion but notice above all what reasons you give in their support. Thinking and talking about this area of knowledge demands a lot from you in terms of reflection on your own ideas, willingness to exchange views with others, and readiness, even if your own views are firm, to listen for what justifications persuade others. What touches us most deeply can be contestable.

Scope: What is ethics all about?

If ethics seems at moments to be messy and confusing, that is not a weakness in ethics but instead a characteristic of what it takes as its subject. It deals with human thoughts and actions, to give an understanding of goodness and moral choice. Where the human sciences and history deal with how people *are* or *were* in their thoughts and conduct, ethics deals with how people *should be*.

Ethics surveys all that human beings do and persistently asks knowledge questions: “What does it mean to be good?” “What should I/we do (or not do)?” “How do we justify our moral decisions?” And then it explores possible ways of thinking about the questions and possible ways to answer.

We often use the words “moral” and “ethical” interchangeably in everyday language. Here, for clarity, we consider morality to be our sense of right and wrong and ethics to be the area of knowledge that examines that sense of morality and the moral codes we develop from it. We treat moral decisions and choices as the material for ethical reflection and ethical decision-making.

For Reflection

Why be moral?

How did you gain your own sense of right and wrong?

Have you (except, of course, when you were very young) ever been close to doing anything you “knew” to be immoral? If you stopped, what stopped you? Why did you think what you were about to do was immoral?

With what others do you share this sense of right and wrong? Is it linked to any kind of community to which you belong – locally, nationally, or internationally?

Since all of us are involved throughout our lives in moral decision-making, ethics is an area of knowledge whose subject matter concerns us personally. And it is to your own thoughts that we turn next – in the reflection above and your response to the questions that come with the opening activity “How should people treat each other?” They ask you to consider some of your own moral responses, and where they come from.

Shared knowledge and the “knowledge community” for ethics.

Since all of us deal with ideas of morality in our lives, we are *all* part of the knowledge community for ethics. It is shared knowledge of the broadest sort, including everyone in the world and affecting numerous aspects of our lives. Like the arts, it pervades our everyday lives – though possibly with a greater need to respond and make decisions.

In the arts, you will recall, we considered the way our personal knowledge intersected with shared knowledge. We are all able to respond to and understand the arts, to a large extent, without formal training. Yet some people have taken in greater shared knowledge on the background of the arts and the topics in the field. Artists, musicians, and writers, for instance, or critics



knowledgeable in particular forms, can illuminate for us many ideas that we could have missed. While we can all formulate opinions, we gain from the shared knowledge of *informed opinion*.

In ethics, similarly, some people specialize in understanding what the major knowledge questions are, how they have been answered in the past, and how they could be answered freshly. These people are philosophers, with some of them also being religious scholars. They exchange ideas and views much as in other academic areas, with discussion and debate in peer-reviewed journals and conferences, and sometimes with public talks that raise important issues for society. Their *informed opinion* develops ethics as an area of knowledge.

Ethics, indeed, is an area of knowledge that consists almost exclusively of critical argument,

## For Reflection

To what extent is evaluation of ideas in all areas of knowledge, not just the arts and ethics, dependent on “informed opinion”?

What is involved in being “informed” in the different areas of knowledge? How “informed” do you have to be to understand and evaluate?

akin to the critical and theoretical side of the arts. Unlike the arts, though, it does not create works of its own to critique: it does not produce anything equivalent to novels or symphonies. What it examines and evaluates is thought, choice, and action that take place in other areas of knowledge and in the whole of life.

## Discussion Activity

### How should human beings treat each other?

Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, looked back in 1998 at a century for which Guernica stands as an icon:

The world has changed since Picasso painted that first political masterpiece, but it has not necessarily grown easier. We are near the end of a tumultuous century that has witnessed both the best and worst of human endeavour. Peace spreads in one region as genocidal fury rages in another. Unprecedented wealth coexists with terrible deprivation, as a quarter of the world's people remain mired in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

**Question for discussion:** What are the moral values that Kofi Annan is either stating or implying for how people should treat each other? Can you pick out from his comments any moral values that you, too, accept?

Look again at Picasso's Guernica. The emotional outcry against violence and the pain of war need not be confined just to the bombed civilians of the village of Guernica.



<sup>1</sup> Kofi Annan on Guernica, speaking 3 November 1998. In G. van Hensbergen. 2004. *Guernica. The Biography of a Twentieth Century Icon*. London: Bloomsbury, P. 1.

## What kind of choices are moral choices?

Ethics deals with moral choices – choices we make that reflect our values of good and bad, right and wrong.

Let us pause to clarify some language! The choices themselves are called “moral choices”. In everyday language, choices that meet with approval are called “moral” and those that meet with condemnation are called “immoral”. Choices that do not involve morality, such as a choice between seeing one Bollywood film or another, or choosing chocolate ice cream rather than strawberry, are called “amoral” or “morally neutral”.

Almost any choice, however, has the potential to be a moral choice within a particular context: what we wear may be merely a matter of style but can also come accompanied by religious and social values; what we eat may be a matter of taste, but can also be grounded in religious prohibitions against certain foods or values placed upon animal life; how we greet someone else

## Levels of generality

In dealing with living a good life and making the right choices, ethics deals with knowledge questions at different levels of generality from the broadest overview questions to the most focused and applied. The area of knowledge has become conventionally divided, as a result, into three broad fields. We will touch on each briefly

## Discussion Activity

### Concepts and language: “moral choice”

- Is eating meat a moral issue, involving moral choice? Can you identify different perspectives and present their arguments?
- Is the degree to which people expose parts of their body a moral issue, involving moral choice? Can you identify different perspectives and present their arguments?
- Are poverty and ways of dealing with it moral issues on the part of the society, with moral choices to be made? Can you identify different perspectives and present their arguments?
- Is the death penalty a moral issue in society, with moral choices to be made? Can you identify different perspectives and present their arguments?

Can you point out any issues in your own social context which appear to be moral choices in the eyes of some people but amoral in the eyes of others?





here, in order to give you the Big Picture of what ethics takes within its scope.

- 1. **Meta-ethics:** What is the nature of ethical knowledge?
- 2. **Normative ethics:** How do we know whether we are doing the right thing?
- 3. **Applied ethics:** How do we apply ethical thinking to particular topics under social debate, or to conduct in particular professional fields?

1. Meta-ethics

What is the nature of ethical knowledge?

This overview field of ethics deals with hugely general questions. Are ethical values independent from human beings with a metaphysical existence of their own in the universe, or are they a product of human thought? Psychologically, what motivates people to act morally – and is morality part of human nature? Do moral truths exist?

Ethical absolutes and human rights

Arguments that some moral principles are absolute and universally applicable lie behind the concept of human rights. These rights are the basic entitlements of all human beings. Politically, they have been accepted internationally in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>2</sup> signed in 1948 at the United Nations by all countries of the world.

The document opens with this initial founding statement, the basic assumption or premise on which rests all the subsequent assertions: “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

We give just the first articles out of the full 30 articles here and encourage you to find them online and read them all, thoughtfully and critically, as a political endorsement of ethical principles. Although human rights are often violated, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the moral standards by which such actions can be judged:

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status...

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6: Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

One meta-ethical debate centres on whether moral principles are universal. Can ethics present “all” statements and generalize on universal moral choices, or is it restricted to making “some” statements that are confined to some people or some circumstances? Ethical relativism and ethical absolutism take contrary perspectives on this issue.

*Ethical relativism* argues that there is no such thing as right and wrong outside the values of the particular individual or the values of the society. It points observationally to moral variability from person to person and society to society and places emphasis on divergences. It also counter-argues any justifications for ethical judgments that transcend individual or group values.

The weakness of relativism in logical terms is that it is self-defeating: if all claims are just relative to the particular person or group, then so is relativism itself. Many would also find weakness in practical and emotional terms in that its implications are repugnant: it nullifies all general moral judgments

and allows no possible grounds for general condemnation of any actions, including slavery, infanticide, rape, torture, or genocide.

What relativism contributes to ethical debate, by rejecting any moral absolutes, is an emphasis on responsiveness to particular circumstances. It also may *possibly* result in its adherents thinking through personal values and tolerating those of other people. *Ethical absolutism* (or ethical objectism), at the other end of the spectrum, argues that there is such a thing as right and wrong applicable universally. It uses arguments from moral principles that do not vary with the situation, the society, or the individual.

Its weakness is that, in reality, there appear to be no moral judgments accepted by every society worldwide. Thus, it cannot be justified by observation that there are values on which all societies agree, without exception. Since ethics argues for how people *should* act rather than solely

observing how people *do* act, however, it can still be argued that they ought to agree, or would if they really knew! Its greater weakness, in practical and emotional terms, lies at the other extreme from relativism’s: it opposes the arbitrariness of relativism, but argues for inflexibility.

Absolutism contributes a lot to ethical debate. It challenges all other systems to try to rise above immediate circumstances and establish a guide that would be applicable worldwide. It also challenges traditional codes of morality to be open to change.

The two positions, extremes in the ethical spectrum, remind us that ethics is not an area of knowledge where the conclusions are based on describing how the world *is*. Instead, it deals with how it *ought* to be. Neither is it an area of knowledge with methods of proof that can be expected to command universal assent.

And yet ... people do come to a considerable level of agreement. They are often in accord

The golden rule in world religions<sup>3</sup>

Christianity

All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.  
*Matthew 7:1*

Confucianism

Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state.  
*Analects 12.2*

Buddhism

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.  
*Udana-Varga 5.1*

Hinduism

This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others that you would not have them do unto you.  
*Mahabharata 5.1517*

Islam

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.

*Sunnah [or 40 Hadith of an-Nawawi 13]*

What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.  
*Talmud, Shabbat 31d*

Taoism

Regard your neighbor’s gain as your gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.  
*Tai Shang Kan Yin P’ien*

Zoroastrianism

That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself.  
*Dadisten-I-dinik, 94.5*

<sup>2</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

<sup>3</sup> Teaching Values, <http://www.teachingvalues.com/goldenrule.html>, accessed 30 July 2012.



on convincing arguments – ones that make assumptions that seem acceptable, provide clarity in the reasoning, and put forward justifications that seem compelling. Cogent ethical arguments can provide ways of thinking about topics that seem, rather like models in other areas of knowledge, to capture the essential features and clear away the clutter.

Moreover, despite the arguments of relativism that ethics can be considered only in terms of *particular cases*, we continue as individuals and societies to seek the *generalizations* that can provide useful guidance. We cannot establish them in the way that the natural sciences establish scientific laws or the human sciences establish general trends; ethics is not dealing with the physical, material world. But as we seek guides to moral action we look for

*generalized ideas* in ethics, in order to be able to apply them to our own particular circumstances.

## 2. Normative ethics

*How do we know whether we are doing the right thing?*

Normative ethics deals with choices and actions, asking the question “What should I (or we) do?” Answers to this question involve values of right and wrong, and are often phrased as sentences using “should” or “ought”. “You should do X” is a normative ethical statement.

More broadly, normative ethics attempts to provide answers using general approaches that act as guides to thought and action. There is more than one general approach, however, with its own assumptions and ways of arguing. The coherent

### “Acting out of concern for others’ well-being”

by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

“Actually, I believe there is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or nirvana. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, ritual, prayer, and so on. Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of nirvana and salvation, are directly connected to religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however. There is thus no reason why the individual should not develop them, even to a high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic spiritual qualities.”

<sup>4</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama. 1999. *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead. pp. 21–4.

perspectives within normative ethics are known as “ethical theories” – just as the perspectives on the arts (page) are known as “critical theories”. (We will have reason later to consider the different shades of meaning given to the word “theory” in different areas of knowledge.) What are these different ethical perspectives, or ethical theories? Below is an activity in which you can identify them yourself.

## 3. Applied ethics

*How does ethical thinking apply to situations in society?*

Where meta-ethics hovers above moral choices looking at their nature, and where normative ethics moves closer to consider how to make those choices and to decide what we *should do*, applied ethics gets right into specific topics, bringing normative ethics to bear on moral issues controversial in

## The ethical dilemma

Although ethics is often characterized as an area of conflicting conclusions and controversy, we venture to suggest that people tend to be much in

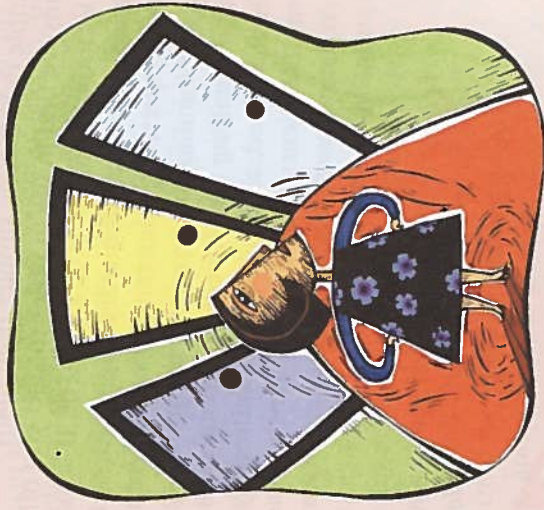
### Discussion Activity

#### Ethical dilemma: IB examination hall

A teacher, while supervising an IB examination, sees someone indisputably cheating. (Note that the issue here is not one of sense perception and possible error. It is a *given* in this question that the student really is cheating.) Read all pieces of information carefully, and then decide what you think the right action is for the teacher to take. The conclusion you reach is less important than your reasons for reaching it, so we encourage you to think from different perspectives.

- The student needs to pass the exam in order to get his IB diploma.
- The student is predicted to pass the exam.
- The student is very popular, so his friends will be upset over the incident if his cheating is exposed.
- The teacher really likes the student.
- No one else sees the student cheating, and at this moment he is not aware that the teacher has seen him.
- No one else writing the exam is cheating.
- The teacher has undertaken invigilation, or the prevention of exam irregularities of any kind, as part of her professional responsibility.

Now describe what you think is the right course of action for the teacher to take.



- The student is under pressure to succeed from his family and his community, who expect him to bring them pride.
- The teacher has heard it said that the student has cheated in the past in minor ways, but cannot recall the details.
- The IB system of examinations is a means of comparing student performance worldwide with identical examination conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics/#H1>. This is a good resource if you want to know more. It is clearly written and presented, and describes itself as a peer-reviewed academic resource.

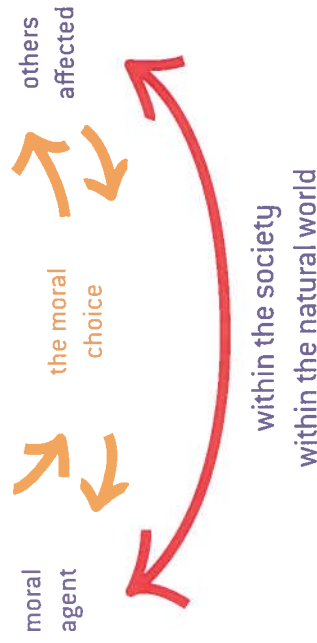


agreement in moral decision-making. It is when we face *dilemmas*, however, that we are most often pushed to look at our values consciously and, in ethical argument, try to resolve what the moral action would be and why.

We ask you to engage in this kind of thinking yourself, in order to recognize some of the major lines of argument in normative ethics. To give you the chance to discover what you think yourself and how you would argue, we give you a single example of a dilemma, one in an IB examination hall. In discussing it, treat disagreements as valuable and consider the case that can be made for any point of view.

## Theoretical Critical perspectives in normative ethics

The situation of the IB examination hall provides an example deliberately simpler than many situations we find in life in order to start you off with a focus on major lines of argument. It is likely that a good class discussion will bring to the surface different perspectives, ones centred on each of the elements of the diagram provided: the moral agent (the person making the choice), the moral choice, the others affected, and the background society and world. Our ensuing comments here assume that you have already thought about and discussed the dilemma yourself.



### 1. Did you evaluate with emphasis on the moral agent and intentions?

The “moral agent” is the person making the choice. The teacher is the moral agent of this dilemma as it is written, but did you also consider the student as a moral agent making a choice?

When we focus attention on the moral agent, we are likely to approach ethics from one of two

directions – to emphasize either the person’s *intentions* or the person’s *moral character*.

It is the first one that is most relevant to case studies of specific choices – *intentions*. As this case is written, the student intends to cheat; there is nothing accidental about his action. What does the teacher *intend* to do if she ignores the cheating? Is she aiming to protect a student she likes? What does she *intend* if she exposes the cheating: retribution to the student, justice for other students, or protection of her own job? In this particular case, do her motives affect your evaluation of her possible choices?

We often take people’s intentions into account. If someone injures you, you are likely to judge the hurt and damage quite differently depending on whether the injury was completely accidental or whether it was deliberately inflicted.

Even in a court of law where the codes are formalized, the apparent motives of a lawbreaker are often taken into account in the sentence. In at least some legal systems, premeditated murder, for example, brings a harsher judgment than a killing considered to be an unplanned crime of passion.

When intentions lie in complex human psychology, intertwined with beliefs and emotions, however, they can be quite elusive to pin down. As we considered regarding emotion as a way of knowing, it is difficult to *know* the feelings of others and it is possible to lack *self-knowledge* about our own. How can we be sure that a person’s intentions are what they claim them to be, or that we are identifying even our own intentions accurately?

A further issue to be considered is whether the person could have reasonably expected the damaging outcome or have taken precautions to avoid it. A drunk driver can claim, “I didn’t *mean* to kill the pedestrian”. However, he does have the responsibility, most would argue, to be driving with care and not to be driving drunk.

The second ethical approach that centres on the moral agent is focused on *moral character*. It is less likely to have come up through this case study, but we mention it briefly here by way of introduction: virtue ethics. Virtue ethics emphasizes someone’s moral character as a whole – not looking at isolated choices or even specific fine moral qualities. A person of virtue

## For Reflection

What is the relationship between ethics and the laws of a society? Can there be an unjust law?

What is the relationship between ethics and the customs of a society?

What is the relationship between ethics and religions?

What are the advantages of dissociating ethics from all three of these for separate consideration?

embodies virtues and, although philosophers have debated what those are, they are often given to include honesty, prudence, courage, wisdom, justice, and generosity. A person’s actions are a reflection of inner morality. We do not apply this approach to this case study because virtue ethics is holistic rather than centred in specific choices and actions.

### 2. Did you evaluate with emphasis on the choice itself, and moral rules of right and wrong?

When we focus attention on the choice itself, we are generally assessing its compliance with rules or principles.

The teacher’s choice in the examination hall has the potential to raise several moral principles. Did you take into account, for instance, the obligations of the teacher as an invigilator to report cheating, or the obligation of the student not to cheat in the examination? These obligations, or duties, involve making promises to act in a particular way as you take on particular roles, and then telling the truth as you claim to fulfill them.

Principles and duties can be derived in different ways. Religious teaching gives rules to follow, such as the Ten Commandments of the Abrahamic Old Testament telling followers not to lie, steal, or desire what other people have. Someone who believes in God and accepts moral imperatives asserted in sacred text or scriptures is likely to consider them absolute rules to follow. Interpretation of what those imperatives mean and how they should be applied, however, can be contentious.

Reasoning, quite a different source of justification, may also lead to rules and duties. Philosopher Immanuel Kant, presenting rule-based ethics of deontology, argued that moral duties can be recognized through reason, and that they are *absolute*. That is, the duty must be followed regardless of the circumstances.

Kant’s principle of *respect for persons* is a fundamental one in this regard, rather like an ethical premise – an identified and articulated assumption on which all further reasoning rests. He argued that human beings, as free rational beings, possess status and worth in themselves. All persons are owed respect.

This approach to ethics attempts to establish universal moral principles, even in face of the cultural and individual variability of human societies over what is considered right and wrong. It lies behind the concept of human rights, for instance, which identifies basic entitlements of all human beings, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or freedom from being tortured.

Sometimes rule-based ethics are established in a more limited way, though, for particular spheres of action. In applied ethics, principles are developed to guide the specific circumstances within which the moral agents will be working. Some organizations formalize their rules in this way, as the International Baccalaureate does for the examination system of our example. Professional bodies, for example, those for doctors or engineers, often set out codes of conduct for their own members to follow. These codes of ethics remove the stress of moral dilemmas from their members by clarifying appropriate choice, and contribute towards more predictable and consistent professional action.

Dilemmas arise within this approach to ethics, though, when principles that *must* be obeyed come into conflict with each other and result in a problem with no solution. Suppose that you promised a friend that you would keep her secret, but then what she tells you fills you with fear that she is in danger. Both keeping a promise and preserving life are your duties, but you cannot fulfill either one without failing to fulfill the other. In response, philosopher W.D. Ross has ranked duties so that some override others: you would be right to save your friend, not because breaking a promise is morally acceptable in itself but because saving your friend takes moral priority.



3. Did you evaluate with emphasis on the effect on others – the consequences of the choice?

When we focus attention on the consequences of a choice or an action, we are following moral guidance broadly familiar. “Think about others!” Utilitarian ethics judges the right action to take based on looking for the maximum happiness or benefit for the greatest number of people.

If you did think in terms of the consequences of the teacher’s choice, what impact did you take into account?

- The immediate consequences on the teacher, the cheating student and the others in the exam hall?
- The longer term consequences on the student’s reputation, education and character, or the teacher’s reputation and character?
- The broader possible consequences on the examination results of other students or the evaluation of the school as a reliable IB examination centre?

If others also argued on the basis of consequences, did you all agree? It is entirely possible to use the same way of arguing and reach different conclusions – for example, that the consequences are worse if the teacher reports the cheating because the student’s IB results will be compromised, or that the consequences are better if the teacher reports it because the student will learn not to cheat. Even long-term consequences are relevant: “Would you want to go to a doctor who had cheated his way through medical school?”

Some difficulties of evaluating ethically according to consequences, though, become evident in this small story of the examination hall:

- How accurately can we predict the consequences of an action? Accurate prediction is a challenge even with measurable data in the sciences, and extremely problematic with people involved. How can we tell in advance what the consequences will really be for either the student or the teacher? Will the student become haunted by guilt and never cheat again or, quite the opposite, go on to a career of cheating?
- What importance do we give each of the possible consequences, and how do we weigh them up against each other? We cannot quantify harm

and benefit in grams and place them physically on a scale to compare them. Is preserving the student’s IB diploma more important than preserving the system’s fairness to all?

What this ethical perspective of evaluating according to consequences cannot do, in the end, is to make ethics into a science. It does use observation, prediction, and attempts at quantifying and weighing results, but it is not dealing with the material world. It is dealing with immaterial value judgments and unpredictable people.

Utilitarianism faces further criticisms. As it argues for the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, it could possibly permit great harm to a minority if the majority is benefited. Is it morally acceptable to kill off a very small tribe of people if a very large tribe would benefit? Utilitarianism has also been criticized for being so dependent on the particular situation that it produces unpredictable decisions.

Objections to ethical ways of thinking, though, can be dealt with by further thinking. In deontological ethics, as we saw, the problem of absolute duties in conflict was resolved by giving priority to some over others. In utilitarian ethics, the problem of not having any absolutes at all has been dealt with by a move towards generalizing the thinking. “Act utilitarianism” looks only at the specific case, for example, whether the particular teacher in our examination story should report the particular student for cheating. “Rule utilitarianism”, however, looks at the effect on everyone, extending to similar circumstances. Whereas the act utilitarian will expect that the teacher could decide either way depending on her understanding of the consequences she is weighing, the rule utilitarian is likely to insist that the teacher report the student, as the consequence of all teachers ignoring all cheating would be to destroy the examination system – a consequence probably held to be undesirable for its further effects on local education. (If it is seen as a desirable consequence, though, the conclusion could be different.)

Utilitarian ethics does not lead to the firm decisions, independent of circumstances, that deontological, rule-based ethics can reach. However, it does allow us to take into account the complexities of situations in which ethical

decisions so often have to be made, and does encourage consideration beyond the immediate moral choice into future effects. It also gives a moral guide to practical decision-making: when resources of time, money, or equipment, for example, are scarce, utilitarian thinking directs them to where they can provide the greatest happiness for the most people.

4. Did you evaluate with emphasis on the moral code of the surrounding society?

When we focus attention on the context of the moral choice, we might take one of two different viewpoints: one stresses obeying or conforming with the expectations of the social context, and the other stresses caring responses within a network of relationships.

From the first viewpoint, the *expectations of the social context*, the moral agent may not be making a conscious choice at all, but simply obeying or conforming. He might, though, accept values in a conscious way, such as those involving loyalty to a group. For example, some IB students of the past, considering not the teacher’s choice but the student’s, have argued that in their home context it would be considered immoral *not* to cheat, on the basis that friends should help each other and that it would be selfish of one student to succeed and allow friends to fail.

A society or culture is rarely homogeneous, and it is entirely possible that in different parts of the social networks that surround you, you would find quite varied responses to this dilemma. When ethics are considered to be relative to the context, there can be no universal guide to moral choice.

From the second viewpoint, *caring responses to relationships*, the moral agent is part of the social situation, in which interconnected individuals should act caringly towards others. The details of context are important, and those who are vulnerable, as young students may be considered to be, require extra support. This approach to ethics rejects the detached and rational stance of deontology and utilitarianism for a more emotionally engaged and spontaneous response, based on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of everyone involved. This approach to ethics is fairly recent, coming out of feminist thought of the 1980s.

Taking this approach, the teacher will be concerned not primarily about the momentary decision to apprehend the student, but about how she and others manage the whole situation. Concerns may include giving counselling support to the student for the choices he now faces and communicating effectively and caringly with any friends who learn about the event and are distressed.

Perspectives in normative ethics	
<b>Emphasis is on the moral agent.</b> <b>Intentions:</b> The intentions of the moral agent are significant: did the person intend good or harm to others?  Or <b>character:</b> Is the person of good character – for instance, a wise, honest, generous person? In philosophy, this approach is called <b>virtue ethics</b> . (It applies not to specific choices but to overall conduct.)	<b>Emphasis is on features of the choice.</b> <b>Moral principles:</b> The moral agent recognizes duties or obligations, formulated as rules to follow. They can be based on reason. In philosophy, this approach is called <b>deontology</b> .  They can also be based on authority such as religious teaching, accepted through faith.
<b>Emphasis is on the people affected by the choice.</b> <b>Consequences:</b> The moral agent chooses the action that will give the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. This approach is based on observation, imagining consequences, and reasoning to make predictions. In philosophy, it is called <b>utilitarianism</b> .	<b>Emphasis is on the social context.</b> <b>Conformity/loyalty:</b> The moral agent acts as expected in the <b>social context</b> .  Or <b>caring:</b> The moral agent acts out of concern for the welfare of others within networks of relationships. The personal and emotional are included as well as reason. In philosophy, this is called <b>ethics of care</b> .



### Discussion Activity

#### What makes a choice “moral”? : practising argument and counter-argument

Two criteria are often advanced to characterize moral choices.

- 1 The moral agent (the person making the choice) has to make the choice consciously and deliberately.
- 2 The action has to affect someone else, other than the moral agent himself.

Take each of these criteria in turn, and formulate as many arguments as you can to *support* them.

### Methods of ethics

If you’ve entered into the dilemma we just gave you, you’ve already tried the methods of ethics. They require no expensive equipment and no special lab or studio! You use your mind.

You ask, “How do I know what the right thing is to do?” And then you think carefully to reach conclusions. The quality of your conclusions will depend on how sound your assumptions and assertions are and how coherently and reasonably you have combined them. If you’ve given a line of argument and justified it with good reasons, then you’ve taken a giant step into the ethical method: *thought and argument*. The goal is to create clear guides to moral action, generated and tested by thoughtful analysis.

The knowledge base for ethics is centuries of such thought and argument, examined and counter-argued to develop greater consistency and usefulness in application. The perspectives we’ve taken on the dilemma of the dining hall have all been developed within nuanced philosophical discussion and debate.

The reflective and argumentative method of normative ethics can appear at times to detach this area of knowledge from the real world into a largely hypothetical one. Yes, it’s the hypothetical imagination at work: “Supposing such-and-such were the case, then what follows from it?” Stories are often used to focus abstract ideas: “Imagine this situation. What should you do?” A preferred form of the hypothetical situation is the dilemma such as the one you’ve just analysed, whose choices

Then take the other side, and formulate as many arguments as you can against them. You may want to divide your class into opposing groups or pairs, each taking either the affirmative or the negative stand.

Exchange your arguments with the rest of the class. The purpose is not to “win” a debate, but to consider arguments on both sides. What benefits does the process of arguing and counter-arguing contribute to the treatment of a topic?

of alternatives help to refine arguments. Indeed, ethics goes even further into storytelling and abstraction with thought experiments, in which the variables of a dilemma are systematically changed to elicit new reactions and consider new arguments. We will return shortly to this method.

Yet all of the hypothetical thinking is developed in preparation for application to the real world, which provides dilemmas which are often complicated and in which variables cannot readily be controlled. Abstraction and argument have to deal with human anger and despair, violence and blood, and situations that sometimes appear hopeless in their tangled complexity. Applied ethics works with abundant real-life case studies – in clinical research, in doctor-patient relationships, in situations faced by social workers, business people, teachers, elected politicians, and numerous other subgroups in society. When normative ethical theory is applied to real life, does it provide guidance that leads coherently to resolution? Does the guidance work in pragmatic terms in an observable world of human beings? If not, then the real-life dilemmas are handed back to philosophical theorists to consider further.

The methods of ethics thus negotiate between abstraction and application, and between specific cases or stories and general lines of argument on what we should do in the world.

Recently, a new field of experimental ethics has bypassed the traditional methods of ethics of thought and argument to investigate morality in a laboratory. Cognitive psychologists use questionnaires and brain scans of people as they

react to hypothetical dilemmas to find out what kind of *moral intuitions* they have in their pre-logical “gut” response. They observe where activity takes place in the brain and how intensely. They can also experiment with what prior stimuli (towards reason, towards emotion) affect how people react intuitively. “Maybe by understanding how people think,” says Joshua Knobe of Yale

University, “we can get more insight into what really is the right answer to these questions.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, researchers in the cognitive sciences are not “doing ethics” – that is, they are not arguing for how people *should* act. Nevertheless, they are inquiring into our intuitions and responses in a way that could lead to further understanding of moral decision-making.

### Discussion Activity

#### Moral choices at scale

In the question sets and discussion below, treat the first set fully before moving on to the second.

##### Set 1

The following are not trick questions. The important thing is to give *reasons* for your response.

- 1 Your friend has a beautiful and valuable ring. You want it. Is it right for you to take it? Why or why not?
- 2 You have accidentally broken your mother’s favourite plate. She sees the broken pieces and, quite upset, asks you if you did it. What is the right thing for you to answer? Why?
- 3 You told your teacher that you would prepare a presentation for tomorrow’s class. However, tonight you would rather watch television. What is the right action for you to take? Why?

#### Follow-up discussion questions

Did your responses in each of these three cases require you to acknowledge the difference between what you would like to do and what you feel you should do?

What do we mean by “conscience”? Do you think that it is something that you are born with, or do you think that it develops with maturity and awareness? Conscience is sometimes spoken of as something that “pricks” you or as a little voice in your ear. How do you experience it (if you do)?

##### Set 2

In each of the following cases, give reasons for your response.

- 1 You are the leader of a country. A neighbouring country has territory with valuable oil fields that they are not developing and seem not to need. You want them. Is it right for you to invade and take them? Why or why not?
- 2 You are the director of a company that has accidentally spilled harmful chemicals into a river. The government environmental agency detects the spill, assesses the damage, and decides that you are responsible. You want to deny that you caused it. What is the right thing for you to do?
- 3 You are the leader of a country that has signed a world agreement not to develop nuclear weapons. You are inclined, however, to do otherwise because possessing the weapons is in the interests of your country. What is the right thing for you to do and why?

#### Follow-up discussion questions

Do you find that the questions in the second trio are similar to the original three? The difference is the scale! From your own experience and your knowledge of world politics, do you think that human beings adopt different moral behaviour on the large scale than on the small scale?

What are the constraints on human actions to compel moral behaviour? Are they different at a small scale in your own home or community from what they are on a large scale, international level?

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Knobe on Experimental Philosophy” Podcast Rationally Speaking: exploring the borderlands between reason and nonsense. Minute 18:55. 7 November 2010. <http://www.rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs21-joshua-knobe-on-experimental-philosophy.html>



For Reflection

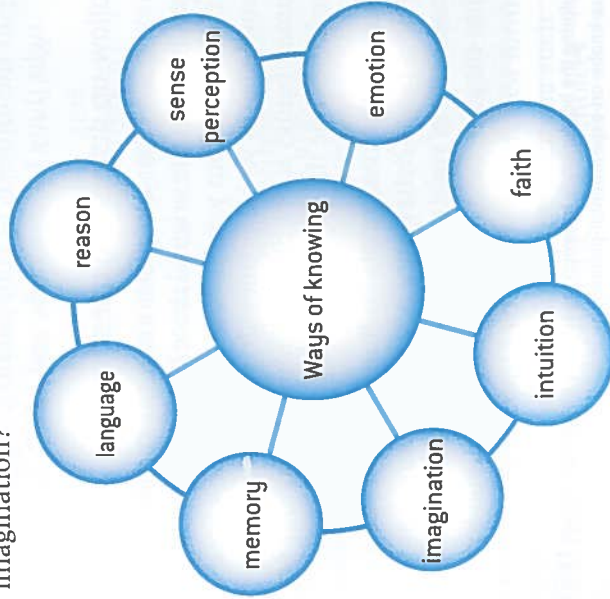
Ways of knowing

Where does a moral sense come from? What ways of knowing seem to be involved in gaining a sense of morality?

What ways of knowing do the different approaches of normative ethics use? Look back to the four perspectives we treated earlier in order to respond to the following questions:

- Which perspective of the four we treated earlier uses reason most centrally, to establish or apply general rules? Do all perspectives involve the use of reason?
- Which perspectives might use faith as a way of knowing, and religious belief?
- Which one applies reasoning to observation (sense perception) and prediction? To what extent is it using the methods of science as it does so?
- Which ones draw most on emotion and imagination? In what different ways? Do all perspectives involve emotion and imagination to a degree?
- What is the role of language in all of the ethical perspectives? To what extent do the methods of ethics depend on language?

What ways of knowing are involved when we shift from normative ethics to applied ethics? Does the application of ethical thinking to real people and their problems change the ways of knowing used, such as sense perception and imagination?



Thought experiments

Of the methods we have just considered, it may be the “thought experiment” that most demands further explanation. In an experiment in a laboratory, a researcher will run the test again and again to check it and possibly, with control, change variables that contribute to what happens. Ethics does not deal with beakers and bunsen burners, but does take an approach that is similar, at least metaphorically.

In a thought experiment, the irrelevant details of background life are cleared away to help us see more clearly the essential ethical features – much as in a model in the sciences. The thought experiment may use simplified stories, then change features of the fictional circumstances to see whether they make a difference to the ethical conclusions that people might reach. Using the imagination, it can follow the implications of changing circumstances and different lines of argument.

We will take as an example fictional dilemmas that have generated considerable discussion since the 1960s – the “trolley problems”.

The most entertaining challenge they initially present is to know what a trolley is, since vocabulary in English is used slightly differently in different countries. A trolley, in these problems, is a trolley car, a bus-like vehicle that moves on tracks. It is roughly equivalent to a tram. It is not a shopping cart (though the lethal potential of a shopping cart is not to be underestimated). Armed with these definitions, you are prepared to tackle the discussion activity “Trolley problems”.

These trolley problems are a development of the philosophical principle of the Double Effect: a harmful action might be permissible if it also promotes a good effect.<sup>7</sup> They have been developed extensively to add one variable or another to the hypothetical story in what one commentator has wryly called “the ever-expanding universe of trolley problems”<sup>8</sup>. Suppose that the person standing on the tracks was your mother. Suppose that the large man you could push onto the tracks was a villain, who was

<sup>7</sup> “Doctrine of Double Effect,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-effect/>  
<sup>8</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, “Rationally Speaking,” Podcast, 7 November 2010, <http://www.rationallyspeakingpodcast.org/show/rs21-joshua-knobbe-on-experimental-philosophy.html>

responding to trolley problems and their variations, cognitive scientists are gaining knowledge on our moral intuitions – or quick pre-logical responses.

It is not clear, however, whether intuitive responses to dilemmas in experiments carry over to the real world. After all, the participants in the experiment are using their intuitions and hypothetical imaginations in an artificial situation (under a brain scan) removed from consequences. Can we extrapolate to the real world, and assume that they really would react that way if faced with an equivalent real-life choice (if there is such a thing)?

Moreover, an important distinction remains. Cognitive science is not ethics: it is not yet clear how conclusions can be drawn, from experiments on the brain, on how people *should* behave.

Methods and their assumptions

If the runaway trollies (or any other dilemmas) are used for traditional ethical argument rather than experiment on moral intuitions, they have to be recognized for the way in which they direct thinking down particular paths. Ethical theories and their mind-models do share this feature with theories in other areas of knowledge – that they



England, this is a trolley. San Francisco, this is a trolley.

responsible somehow for the five people in front of the trolley being in danger. Suppose ...

These stories can be used to focus some forms of normative ethical thinking, such as utilitarian thinking and deontological thinking, on what the right action is.

Part of their use, however, has most recently been in the experiments of cognitive science we mentioned earlier in connection with the methods of ethics. By doing brain scans of people

Discussion Activity

Trolley problems

These dilemmas focus ethical thinking on specific choices we make in our moral decision-making. Discuss the first one before moving on to the second. Is there a difference in your decision as the details change?

The following summary is given by ethicist Peter Singer:<sup>9</sup>

Version 1

“You are standing by a railroad track when you notice that a trolley, with no one aboard, is rolling down the track, heading for a group of five people. If the trolley continues on its present track, they will all be killed. The only thing you can do to prevent this tragedy is throw a switch that will divert the trolley onto a sidetrack. But

there is one person on this sidetrack, and he will be killed. Should you throw the switch?”

Version 2

“In another version of this dilemma, the trolley is again rolling down the track, heading for a group of five people. This time, however, there is no switch or sidetrack. Instead, you are on a footbridge above the track. You consider jumping off the bridge, in front of the trolley, thus sacrificing yourself to save the five people in danger, but you realize that you are far too light to stop the trolley. Standing next to you, however, is a very large stranger. The only way you can stop the trolley killing five people is by pushing this large stranger in front of the trolley. He will be killed, but you will save the other five. Should you push the stranger?”

<sup>9</sup> Peter Singer, “Putting Practice into Ethics” *The New York Sun*, 16 January 2008, <http://www.nysun.com/arts/putting-practice-into-ethics/69595/> See also: Josh Clark, “How the Trolley Problem Works”, <http://people.howstuffworks.com/trolley-problem.htm>



draw attention to some characteristics and not others of what they study.

Many dilemmas, in this way, focus ethics on situations of individual choice rather than group decisions, and isolated moments of choice within the web of variables. How could they do otherwise, you might wonder, and still be able to use focused, rational argument? Perhaps they couldn't. Yet the focus on *individuals*, *choices*, and *moments* is not necessarily the only possible centring for ethics, and *rational argument* not necessarily the only possible method. The dominant ethical theories that adopt this centre and method – deontology (duty ethics) and utilitarianism (consequentialism) – have been argued to be predominantly western and even argued, in some feminist thought, to be predominantly male.

By the very nature of how they think about morality and living a good life, other ethical theories apply less well to the dilemmas or thought experiments set up for analysis. *Virtue ethics* and *ethics of care* emphasize more holistic or systemic human qualities. They do not *contradict* deontology or utilitarianism; differing theories in ethics do not prove each other false! Instead, they provide alternative internally consistent perspectives to illuminate different ideas within the study of what it means to be moral.

### Ethics and controversy

Dilemmas and controversies – yes, these do to a large extent characterize ethics in the minds of many people. For one thing, moral controversy often catches attention in society, and it is in moral controversies that people often call for ethics to help find resolutions. For another, the methods of ethics do not always allow a tidy solution: there is not just one single line of thinking on which everyone is sure to agree. It may be one of the delicious ironies of knowledge that the questions that are most important to ask of ourselves as human beings might be the ones which least yield clear and certain answers.

Yet we would venture to say that ethics does, in fact, give many very clear answers. Regardless of what line of argument you take, you can end up with considerable agreement: it is wrong that in a world of plenty, millions of children die of hunger; it is wrong that nations still go to war against

### For Reflection

To what extent do you find each of the ethical perspectives offered here a useful or insightful way of thinking about morality? Do you find one or other of them fits better with your own mind and feelings?

How do you react to trolley problems and other mind experiments? Do you personally find it interesting to consider hypothetical dilemmas and the different ways of thinking that can be brought to them? Or do you find yourself impatient with hypothetical problems when so many real ones surround you in the world?

each other as a result of greed. What is missing from the world is not agreement that some things are morally unacceptable. What is missing is the collective determination, worldwide, to act on that ethical awareness and make a change.

### Ethics and responsibility

Ethical conclusions deal with “should” and “ought”. They prescribe how we should act in the world – and they carry, as a result, implications for action. They carry, in short, responsibility.

But what specific actions should we take in order to “be responsible” or “fulfill responsibilities”? It is at this point that TOK begins to bow out. In TOK, we aim to introduce you to the kind of knowledge questions that are posed in ethics and the nature of the knowledge in that area: the perspectives that animate the area, the methods that are used, and the justifications given. We point out that ideas of “should” and “ought” point towards action, and we can follow the implications for action of any particular ethical stand you take. But when we come to the practical “how” of taking action, or the specific issues on which you *should* act, we refer you to other parts of your IB Diploma Programme and other parts of your life.

### CAS and the concept of service

Acting morally and taking responsibility are clearly part of the whole of your life. Yet within your IB studies there is one programme that is explicitly directed towards ethical education. It picks up where TOK leaves off, and moves thought into

action. The IB subject guide for creativity, action, service (CAS) is very clear on its aim to provide students with opportunities for moral growth and reflection: “Because it involves real activities with significant outcomes, CAS provides a major opportunity for ethical education, understood as involving principles, attitudes and behaviour.”<sup>10</sup>

“Principles, attitudes and behaviour”: the *principles* could be seen as those derived within a system of duties, obligations, and rights (a deontological system); the *attitudes* could be seen as those that arise from developing character (virtue ethics) and fostering relationships (ethics of care); the *behaviour* could be seen as arising from any of the normative theories, but certainly guided by concern for the effects of actions on others (utilitarianism) – and as adding the crucial element of action.

The overriding idea in CAS, though present in all the ethical perspectives we have examined, is that we owe something to other people, and that we should act on it in the form of “service”. The idea of service to others takes its root in the most basic of ethical concepts. Ethical theories take as their starting point – as their most basic assumption – the worth and dignity of every human being, and the need to treat every person with respect. The logical results, following on from that premise, include the following principles of a duty-based ethical theory:

- respect for autonomy: we should recognize people's choices over their own lives

### Discussion Activity

#### Service to others

In CAS, doing service reflects ethical ideas on what we owe to others. With your own service activities in mind, exchange your thoughts with the rest of your class on the following questions.

- 1 In your own service activities within CAS, have you ever encountered moral dilemmas? If so, how have you thought about them, resolved them, or learned from them?

- non-maleficence (least harm): we should not harm others
- beneficence: we should act to benefit others
- justice: we should be fair in giving everyone what is due to them (different interpretations dispute what is meant by “justice”)
- fidelity: we should keep our promises
- veracity: we should tell the truth.

In one way or another, all of these principles are involved in how we act with others in all circumstances. In the concept of service, what stands out is the *principle of beneficence*: we should act to benefit others.

The actual form of benefiting others depends on you, your context, and the stage of your life. Indeed, acting to support and benefit others may be so much part of your life that thinking of it as “service” may even seem strange. Isn't it *just what one does*? Yet the conscious recognition of a principle of beneficence may open up reflections on why you might accept it, and whether you might extend its application beyond the communities within which you usually move.

### How large is your circle of caring?

Certainly, one of the recurring knowledge claims in ethics is that as human individuals we owe something to others – attitudes of respect, concern, or even love, and actions that promote their welfare along with our own. Ethical systems based on consequences aim for the maximum of human

- 2 Consider the following questions taken from the IB CAS subject guide. They are questions asked by both CAS and TOK. Exchange ideas with classmates on what “ethical education” involves, and what “obligation” means – especially as it comes not from outside yourself, but within.

- In what ways might CAS be said to promote ethical education?
- Is service to others, in whatever form, a moral obligation?
- If so, on what might the obligation be based? If not, why not?

<sup>10</sup> Creativity, action, service guide. 2007. International Baccalaureate. Page 4.



happiness. Ethical systems based on principles present doing good for others as an obligation. Furthermore, ethical systems based on care stress nurturing relationships as important. All of these ethical systems agree that we should care for others. Religions of the world teach variations on the golden rule – to treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. Together, they lead to concern, caring, and compassion.

Within your IB studies, you have encountered the idea of owing something to others within our TOK treatment of ethics as an area of knowledge and within the service activities of CAS. The idea of contributing actively to making the world a better place opens the list of qualities in the IB learner profile: “The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.”

As we conclude this chapter on ethics, we leave you with another question for further thought. If you are concerned for the welfare of others, how far do you extend your concern? Do you care about your family and friends and act to give them help and support? Do you also feel concern for

For Reflection

Do I have any ethical responsibility to inform myself about topics that affect my community or my world? Is there knowledge that I should gain, or should not gain, for ethical reasons?

Do I have a responsibility to gain any *skills* that could be used to help others?

Do I have a responsibility to act on my knowledge? If I am aware of situations where I could act to improve them, am I obligated to act to the best of my ability?

We sometimes hear people say, “It’s just not ME to be a Mother Teresa! I believe my main responsibility is to be true to myself.” Would you accept such an argument? Or do you think that everyone on this planet has a responsibility to act for the good of others?

the well-being of others in your society, such as to those in some form of need, and others unlike yourself? Do you think beyond to the world, to “think globally” while you “act locally”? How large is your circle of caring?

Discussion Activity

Knowledge framework: ethics

First summarize your responses to these questions in your own words. Then exchange ideas with others in your class.

1. **Scope:** What is ethics all about? What does it take as its subject matter and its goals? What contribution does it make to knowledge overall, and to other areas of knowledge?
2. **Language/concepts:** Why is it significant to name and define central concepts in ethics? What central concepts characterize this area of knowledge?
3. **Methodology:** How are ways of knowing (including language) used in creating, exchanging, and evaluating knowledge claims

in ethics? To what extent does ethics use a diversity of methods, and to what extent a general methodology shared in common? How do different perspectives illuminate different aspects of ethics?

4. **Historical development:** How does ethics of today build on ethics of the past? Have individual, social, or technological factors given particular directions to ethics?
5. **Links to personal knowledge:** How do people contribute personal knowledge to this area, and what do they gain from its shared knowledge? How does ethics affect your own knowledge? What are the main responsibilities that you think you have in the world?

Ethics into action

Do I have a responsibility for gaining knowledge? If so, why? And what?

**SKILLS**  
knowing how

**KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS**  
knowing that ...

**practical skills**

**skills of research and critical thinking**

**information and explanations on issues that affect our world**



**EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE**

**exposure and personal experience**

Does knowledge bring responsibility?  
If so, why?