



Ethical Reading Webinar

How do you decide what the right thing to do is?

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**Host: Gurprit Singh,
Ethical Reading**

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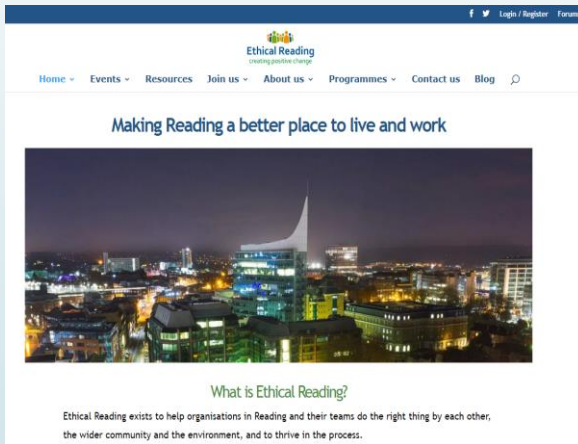


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LUNCHtime WEBINARS



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About Me

- ▶ Luke Elson
- ▶ I teach in the philosophy department at the University of Reading.
- ▶ Almost entirely in ethics, with some other interests in logic and the history of philosophy.
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Outline

1. The subject-matter of normative ethics.
2. Two prominent theories of ethics.
3. Case studies.



Normative ethics.

- We often say that some actions are 'ethical' or 'morally right':
 - Helping those in need; Giving to charity; Keeping promises.
- Other actions are 'unethical' or 'wrong':
 - Kicking friendly dogs for fun; Stealing; Lying.
- Normative ethics looks for a systematic theory and explanation of these categorisations.



Two views in normative ethics

- We'll talk about two simple or 'classic' normative theories: a consequentialist theory, and a deontic theory.
- Consequentialism.
 - Actions are right or wrong because of their consequences.
- Deontology.
 - Some kinds of actions are forbidden or required.



Act-Utilitarianism

- ▶ The most famous version of consequentialism:
 - ▶ Act-Utilitarianism: any act is morally right if, only if, and because it maximises well-being.
- ▶ 'Utilitarian' because the only consequence which matters is happiness or well-being.
- ▶ 'Act-' because we evaluate acts one at a time.
- ▶ The theory is impartial: everyone's well-being counts for the same amount.



Implications of act-utilitarianism

1. It appears to allow (require!) injustice: if sending an innocent person to jail would improve well-being (by making a baying mob happy), then you may and even *should* send that person to jail.
2. Impartiality is extremely demanding. It's wrong for me to spend money on my child when it would do more good for someone else's children.



Deontology

- Generally, the view that there are some kinds of acts or omissions which are forbidden or required, because of the kind of act they are.
- Think of the Ten Commandments: 'thou shalt not...'
- Probably the most famous deontic theory is due to Immanuel Kant.
- His Categorical Imperative tells us what we must and must not do.



The Formula of Humanity

- ▶ This is one version of Kant's Categorical Imperative:
 - ▶ 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.'
- ▶ What is treating people as ends rather than merely as means?
- ▶ Many people interpret this in consent terms: don't lie to people, or use them without their consent.



About these views

- These are extreme versions of consequentialism and deontology.
- There are much more moderate and nuanced versions of both.
- But they get to the heart of the issues.
- For example...



The Murderer at the Door

- A main difference between these views is what they say about exceptional cases, like the baying mob.
 - Utilitarianism: you should send an innocent person to jail if that leads to the best consequences.
 - Kant: sending an innocent person to jail is forbidden.
- Another case: your innocent neighbour is being stalked by a murderer. The murderer asks you if your neighbour is at home. Is it ethically permissible to lie?
 - Utilitarianism: yes, probably.
 - Formula of Humanity: never.



Case: Flawed Medical Device

- A medical device maker discovers that a previous batch of the device had a possibly fatal flaw. It's too late to help those with the device already installed, and current versions of the device are fine.
- If the firm reveals the flaw, it will go bust, and lives will be lost because many other people won't benefit from the (now fixed) device.
- Should the company lie or keep it a secret?



Moral Theories on the Medical Device

- Kantianism absolutely forbids lying.
- Act-utilitarianism holds that lying is morally permissible, indeed required, whenever it would maximise utility, even if only by a little.
- So whether the company should lie depends on the long-term consequences of lying vs telling the truth.



Case: Disruption

- ▶ You work for a large technology company. You've discovered a new product that will disrupt an industry: an automatic web 2.0 piano tuner that syncs to the cloud.
- ▶ It will make you millions, and make piano owners happy.
- ▶ But it will put piano tuners out of business.
- ▶ What should you do?



Moral Theories on Disruption

- Kantianism: unless there's something very fishy going on, market away!
- Utilitarianism: it depends. What are the consequences? We need to be impartial.
- What utilitarianism requires is highly dependent on individual cases.
- And utilitarians are masters of bringing long-run consequences of actions in to play.



Taking Stock

- ▶ I've introduced two broad types of normative ethical theory...
- ▶ ... and applied them to business cases.
- ▶ Most of our everyday moral thinking seems to include a mix of consequentialist and deontic thinking.



Conclusion: how to proceed?

- ▶ If we are unsatisfied with the results of these theories, we have a number of options, including:
 - ▶ **Tough it out.** Ordinary ethical thought is mistaken.
 - ▶ **Refine the theories.** Develop more subtle versions of consequentialism or deontology.
 - ▶ **Anti-theory.** A theory of right acts won't be a (simple) theory or principle, or set of them.
 - ▶ **Virtue ethics.** A focus on the rightness of acts is mistaken: better to focus on *people*.



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