Transitioning to Ethical Reasoning

How important are ethics in today's society?
Larger Context

- Why are we spending time during first week introducing you to ethical reasoning?

- We can think about this by asking a different question…
  - One question leads to more questions! Get used to it! 😊
Who can engage in ethical reasoning?

Some may think…
Ethical Reasoning is Beyond **Any** of Us...
We would propose that ethical reasoning is available to...
EACH of us.
Each of us? Why believe *that*?

- Each of us – faculty in their disciplines, students in their majors – engages in critical thinking.
- Each of us in our lives (as a professional, as a citizen, as a human being) confronts ethical issues and dilemmas.
- Thus, each of us can bring critical thought to bear on ethical issues, questions, dilemmas, and problems. And that *just is* ethical reasoning!
What is ethical reasoning?

- Critical reasoning applied to ethical issues and dilemmas.
What is ethical reasoning?

- A skill that focuses on how to think about and evaluate ethical judgments, not necessarily about what ethical judgments to endorse or make.

- A skill that is available to each of us and a skill that can be improved…with practice!
Dangers of denying this…

- If ethical reasoning is not available to each of us, then ethical reasoning becomes the province of…
More Dangers...

- If we believe that ethical reasoning is not available to each of us, then we betray our educational mission...
Millikin’s Educational Mission

- Prepare you for professional success.
- Prepare you for democratic citizenship in a global environment.
- Prepare you for a personal life of meaning and value.
"Anybody here not in favor of obscene profits?"
Professional success includes an ethical dimension beyond mere conformity to “professional codes of conduct.”

Why?

- Just because it is legal does not mean it is ethical.
- Just because it is part of “corporate culture” does not mean it is ethical.
- As professionals you will face ethical dilemmas and situations that are not covered by rules.
- As professionals you will shape, revise, and reformulate the rules.
YOU WANT ME TO TURN DOWN THE 'UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE' NOMINATION OF DANIEL PIPES? HE'S THE GUY WHO WARNED US OF 9-11 TYPE EXTREMISM!

EXACTLY... THIS MAN IS A DANGEROUS RADICAL!

HE GETS PAID TO THINK!
Democratic Citizenship in Global Environment

- **Democratic citizenship** requires that the citizenry take responsibility for engaging in the enterprise of self-government. In order to do this in a meaningful way, citizens must be able to understand and critically assess controversial issues of the day in an environment of “value pluralism.” Therefore, critical and ethical reasoning is essential to preparing you for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.
“I should have bought more crap.”
Personal Life of Meaning and Value

- Discovering and developing a *personal life of meaning and value* requires skills allowing you to assess and evaluate received opinion, community standards, and community traditions.
  - The aim is not indoctrination but education – helping you develop the skills essential to understanding and evaluating claims about meaning and value.
  - The goal is intellectual autonomy – thinking for yourself.
Our Central Commitment

- At Millikin University, we believe that each of us has the potential to engage in ethical reasoning.

- At Millikin University, we believe that in order to engage in ethical reasoning well, the critical thinking skills that are indispensable for ethical reasoning should be fine tuned and developed.
Ethical Reasoning as Critical Reasoning

- Ethical reasoning is simply reasoning critically about ethical issues and dilemmas.
Ethical Reasoning as Critical Reasoning

➢ As a “species” of critical reasoning, ethical reasoning includes:

- **Analysis** of arguments
  - Directional pattern with premises supporting conclusion
  - Identification of conclusion

- **Evaluation** of arguments
  - Relationship between premises and conclusion
  - Truth of premises
Analysis of Ethical Arguments

The Conclusion
The conclusion of an ethical argument is an ethical statement or ethical judgment.

- For example: It is wrong to employ capital punishment – i.e., capital punishment *should* not be employed.
Ethical Argument: The Conclusion

- An ethical conclusion does not simply describe or predict, but prescribes or evaluates. An ethical conclusion is normative.
  - For example, the conclusion (judgment) that it is wrong to employ capital punishment is not “refuted” by the observation that capital punishment is, in fact, employed. Just because something is employed or done does not mean it should be employed or done.
Analysis of Ethical Arguments

The Premises
Ethical Argument: The Premises

- The supporting premises for an ethical conclusion are typically a combination of ethical and non-ethical statements.

- Crucially, at least one premise must be an ethical statement. Why? See EMA, p.52:
  - “Without a moral premise, the argument would not get off the ground. We cannot infer a moral statement (conclusion) from a nonmoral statement (premise)…”

- Consider the following example…
Example #1 (EMA, p.53)

1) The use of capital punishment does not deter crime.
2) Therefore, the use of capital punishment is wrong.

This argument does not contain an ethical premise. As a result, it is an invalid argument. Even if the premise is true, the conclusion does not follow from it. How can we reform this argument into a valid argument? Consider…
Example #1, Reformed

1) Using a punishment that does not deter crime is wrong.
2) The use of capital punishment does not deter crime.
3) Therefore, the use of capital punishment is wrong.

The addition of the first premise supplies the missing ethical premise and renders the argument valid. (Note: This does not mean it is sound!)
Helpful Hint: Linguistic Markers

- In a well-formed ethical argument, the conclusion and at least one premise must be ethical statements (judgments).
- Typical linguistic markers for ethical statements (judgments) include terms such as “wrong,” “right,” “should,” “ought,” “good,” “immoral,” “desirable,” etc.
Warning: Watch Out for Implied Premises

- You may encounter an argument in which all of the relevant premises are not explicitly stated. One or more may be implied or assumed.
  - The technical term for this sort of argument is an “enthymeme.”

- When you analyze an argument, work to identify any unstated or implied premises. This will often be important when you turn to the evaluation of the argument.

- Consider…
“The use of condoms is completely unnatural. They have been manufactured for the explicit purpose of interfering in the natural process of procreation. Therefore, the use of condoms should be banned.”

This argument does not include an ethical premise. As it stands, then, it is invalid. However, the missing ethical premise is clearly implied by the argument and can be supplied…
Example #2, Reformed

“The use of condoms is completely unnatural. They have been manufactured for the explicit purpose of interfering in the natural process of procreation. Anything that interferes in a natural process should not be allowed. Therefore, the use of condoms should be banned.”
Helpful Hint: Practice (Re)Constructing Arguments

➢ One way to practice learning how to analyze and construct arguments is to begin with incomplete arguments and work to turn them into complete arguments.

➢ Here are some examples…

  • Taken from: http://philosophy.tamu.edu/~gary/bioethics/reasoning/enthymemes.html
Premise: It's morally wrong to treat human beings as mere objects.

Conclusion: So, genetically engineering human beings is morally wrong.

Missing premise: ???

Genetically engineering human beings treats them as mere objects.
Premise: It is biologically natural for humans to eat animal flesh.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is morally permissible for humans to eat animal flesh.

*Missing premise:* ???

*Whatever is biologically natural for humans is morally permissible.*
Premise: It is our moral duty to provide food for future generations.
Conclusion: It follows that it is our moral duty to genetically engineer crops.

Missing premise: ???

Genetically engineering crops provides food for future generations.
Evaluating Ethical Arguments
Evaluating Ethical Arguments

As we noted earlier today, the evaluation of an argument (ethical or non-ethical) is primarily a function of determining the answer to two questions:

• What is the nature of the relationship between the supporting premises (reasons) and the conclusion?
• Are the supporting premises (reasons) true (plausible, reasonable, etc.)?
Question #1: Nature of Relationship Between Premises and Conclusion?

➢ Just like non-ethical arguments, ethical arguments can be deductively valid (invalid) or inductively strong (weak).

➢ Consider the following examples…
Example #3 (EMA, p.51)

1) Committing a violent act to defend yourself against physical attack is morally permissible.

2) Assaulting a mugger who is attacking you is a violent act of self-defense.

3) Therefore, assaulting a mugger who is attacking you is morally permissible.
Example #4

1) Intentionally causing the death of an innocent human being is wrong.
2) Abortion intentionally causes the death of an innocent human being.
3) Therefore, abortion is wrong.
The arguments on the prior two slides are deductively valid arguments. Recall that this means:

- **IF** the premises are true, then the conclusion **must** be true.
  - It does **not** mean the premises are, in fact, true.
- There is no “gap” between premises and conclusion.
Example #5

1) Most individuals who commit murder should be executed.
2) Frank committed murder.
3) Therefore, Frank probably should be executed.
The argument on the prior slide is inductively strong. Recall this means:

• **IF** the premises are true, then the conclusion is *probably* true.
  
  ✓ It does **not** mean that the premises are, in fact, true.
Question #2: Are Premises True?

- Regardless of whether the relationship between the conclusion and the premises is deductive or inductive, a good argument must have true (reasonable, plausible, etc.) premises.
  - A deductively valid argument with true premises is **sound**.
  - An inductively strong argument with true premises is **cogent**.
Assessing Truth of Premises

- Ethical arguments will typically consist of a mix of both ethical and non-ethical premises.

- Premises can be assessed in various ways, including: appeal to empirical evidence, appeal to counterexample, etc.
Focus:

Assessing Ethical Premises
General Criteria for Assessing an Ethical Premise: “The Four C’s”

- Clarity
- Coherence
- Consistency
- Completeness

From:
http://philosophy.tamu.edu/~gary/bioethics/reasoning/evaluating2.html
Evaluating ethical principles and theories

1. Clarity: make sure that we understand what it means and what it applies to.

- "Murder is wrong."
  - Does this include engaging in an action that has death as a predictable side-effect?

- "Thou shalt not kill."
  - Does this include killing in war? An embryo? An animal? A plant? A species?
2. Coherence: ask whether various moral principles fit together in a reasonable way.

- A classic example of a coherence problem is the pairing of the following claims:
(a) it is always wrong to kill a person and
(b) convicted murderers deserve to be executed.
There is a more subtle coherence problem if we encounter an argument that includes the claims:

- (a) we ought to respect each person's autonomy in all matters which do not involve harming others, and
- (b) homosexuality is wrong.

Coherence is basically a question of how well our moral claims fit together, and goes beyond questions of logical contradiction.
3. **Consistency**: ask whether the principle or theory conflicts with our basic, deeply held moral intuitions.

- If a principle leads to the conclusion that it's morally acceptable to torture a two-month old infant because "I wanted to see what it would feel like to do that," we ought to reject it.

- People who happily eat pork chops, but identify "it's wrong to eat dogs" as a basic moral intuition, will have to dig a bit deeper.
4. **Completeness:** this is a matter of how much of our moral life, and how many moral problems and moral decisions are covered by the principle or theory in question.

- Most moral principles apply to a limited range of cases, but any principle which applies to a very limited range of cases should be examined carefully.

- When evaluating moral theories, however, comprehensiveness is always central virtue.
Transition to Tomorrow…
Tomorrow’s Readings

The readings that we are covering tomorrow will provide us with an opportunity to illustrate both the analysis and evaluation of arguments.
Reading Topics

Tomorrow, we will consider two topics:

• 1. Cultural relativism (i.e., the theory that there are no ethical truths that hold for all people at all times, but that what is right within a society is determined by the moral code (norms) of that society).

• 2. Homosexual sex.
Distribution of Readings

- The reading on cultural relativism was sent to you over the summer. It is by James Rachels as is titled, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism.”

- The reading on the moral permissibility of homosexual sex is being distributed today. (You have homework!)
Goals for Tomorrow

- Our primary objective for tomorrow will be to see how the core elements of critical and ethical reasoning that we have discussed today are manifested in the readings.
- We will also be interested in trying to model a deliberative approach to “hot button” emotional topics.
And as always…

THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT WHAT YOU READ!!!