



The Ethics Cup

2022 Finals Case Set

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1. Anger in Politics

When political decisions are made, a lot is at stake. They may make the lives of some people easier, and others significantly harder, and in some instances will make the difference between life and death. Consider decisions about climate change. Cutting subsidies on fossil fuels is likely to significantly increase the costs of living for households.¹ Continuing them, however, will encourage further increases in greenhouse gas emissions, and may accelerate climate change, resulting in huge numbers of climate refugees.² With issues this serious, and with such significant impacts on peoples' lives, it is understandable that many react emotionally to the situation.

But sometimes, even when a situation is as serious as the climate crisis, activists are criticised for 'getting emotional'. In 2019, for instance, Donald Trump claimed that Greta Thunberg, then 17, needed to work on her "anger management problem".³ Even if we accept that some injustice has occurred and we can understand that people feel angry about it, there is a separate question about whether it is appropriate to express that anger. Many philosophers throughout history have been critical of anger. For instance, the Stoics – a school of philosophers in Ancient Greece – saw anger as a form of madness. Drawing on this kind of thought some contemporary philosophers say we should try to train ourselves to avoid getting angry.⁴ Martha Nussbaum argues this case. She thinks anger is "poisonous" and "destructive". As well as being bad for the angry person, she thinks being angry is also bad for getting what you want, because acting angrily deters people who might otherwise join the cause. Instead, she suggests we should see people like Nelson Mandela as role models.⁵ Even in the face of the most horrific injustice, she argues, it is politically advantageous to resist anger.

Others, however, think that anger is both useful and appropriate. While the Stoics claimed that anger was *irrational*, we might instead think it is a rational response to an unjust world.⁶ People who defend anger in politics also dispute the claim that it is politically unhelpful. For example, Amia Srinivasan suggests that the peaceful protests of Martin Luther King would not have been successful, had it not been for the angry activism of the people like Malcolm X.⁷

Study Questions

1. The Stoic philosophers thought anger was always irrational. Were they right, or is anger sometimes a rational response to certain facts about the world?
2. Is anger bad for the quality of political discourse or for the participants?
3. Regardless of whether it is useful or rational, should we try to keep anger out of politics?

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/climate-change/energy-subsidies>

² <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/climate-change-world-must-cut-emissions-or-face-refugees-flooding-across-borders-says-boris-johnson/ar-BB1dWvcM>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/us/politics/greta-thunberg-trump.html>

⁴ <https://aeon.co/ideas/anger-is-temporary-madness-heres-how-to-avoid-the-triggers>

⁵ <https://aeon.co/essays/there-s-no-emotion-we-ought-to-think-harder-about-than-anger>

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/why-fear-and-anger-are-rational-responses-to-climate-change-114056>

⁷ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/a-righteous-fury/>

2. Ethics of Dubbing in Animation

Animated movies and shows employ actors to dub animated characters on screen. While this process is usually straightforward, the case of mismatch between the ethnicity of the character on screen and the dubbing actor has recently sparked debate on whiteness and discrimination in the entertainment industry.

Non-white fictional characters such as Cleveland Brown from *Family Guy*, Diane Nguyen from *BoJack Horseman* and Dr. Wong from *Rick and Morty* are voiced by white actors (Mike Henry, Alison Brie, and Susan Sarandon, respectively). On the one hand, these actors are top professionals who got the job because of their hard work. In addition, their voices and excellent acting skills have greatly contributed to the creation of memorable characters. On the other, however, the fact that non-white characters are impersonated by white actors' voice raises some problems.⁸

In the case of Cleveland Brown, one could object that in the US market the number of roles for black actors is limited as compared with those available to white actors and, therefore, offering jobs like these to white actors furthers the exclusion of black actors from the profession. In the cases of Diane Nguyen and Dr. Wong, it can be objected that there is a long history of stereotypical and unrepresentative portrayals of Asian characters in Western movies and shows and that casting a white actor for an Asian role fosters this kind of misrepresentation.

Study Questions

1. Do you think that matching the ethnicity of fictional characters to that of the actors who voices them could help to diminish the presence of harmful stereotypes in the representation of cultural and ethnic minorities?
2. Do you think that show creators have a moral responsibility to design their shows in a way that include roles for non-white actors?
3. Should directors and producers make sure that the ethnicity of each fictional character matches that of the actor who voices them?

⁸ Regina Rini, *The Ethics of Microaggression* (New York/London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 153-54.

3. Lookism and Free Cosmetic Surgery

According to recent empirical studies, individuals perceived as attractive are more successful both in their personal life and in their career.⁹ This phenomenon is grounded in implicit biases in favour of attractive people, which leads to unconscious discrimination against people perceived as unattractive. This form of discrimination is known as ‘lookism’.

Some have argued that if the state has a duty to provide citizens that are discriminated against with means to overcome unfair biases, then people subject to lookism should receive special protection and support.¹⁰ Among the possible solutions, one proposal is to provide “a person who has been formally recognized as a victim of lookism [...] with benefits for cosmetic interventions (from makeup classes to cosmetic surgery)”.¹¹

On the one hand, this would help individuals that are discriminated against feel empowered and overcome the discrimination. On the other hand, this proposal risks putting further pressure on individuals who choose not to undergo any cosmetic intervention. In addition, offering free cosmetic interventions would be expensive.

Study Questions

1. If it is true that we have an implicit bias in favour of attractive people, is the advantage that this generates for them unfair?
2. Consider the potential benefits of offering free cosmetic interventions to people disadvantaged because of their appearance. Do you think they defeat the costs?
3. If you think that free cosmetic procedures can be a solution to lookism, what should determine eligibility to access them?

⁹ For instance, Daniel S. Hamermesh, *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People are More Successful* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jeff Borland and Andrew Leigh, “Unpacking the Beauty Premium: What Channels Does It Operate Through, and Has It Changed Over Time?” *Economic Record* 90 (2014): 17–32.

¹⁰ Francesca Minerva, “Lookism,” in LaFollette, H. (ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 1–7.

¹¹ Francesca Minerva, “How Should We Tackle Financial and Prosocial Biases against Unattractive People?,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40 (2017): e36.

4. Moral Risks

We are often uncertain about the facts. Consider, for instance:

Driving: You are somewhat intoxicated at a party, and it's time to leave. However, you are uncertain whether driving home tipsy will kill someone else on the road. You can instead take a taxi home and retrieve your car in the morning.

In addition to factual uncertainty, we are often uncertain about morality. Consider:

Charity: You recently inherited £4,000 and are considering whether to spend it on a tropical holiday or donate it to a malaria charity that would use it to save a distant stranger's life.¹² However, you are uncertain whether letting someone die is morally the same as murder.

Vegetarianism: You are at a restaurant that is known for its tasty Hawaiian burgers. You would prefer the beef burger over the veggie burger, but you're uncertain whether killing cows for food is morally the same as killing puppies for entertainment.

Abortion: You are pregnant and considering having an abortion to avoid a significant career setback. However, you are uncertain whether the foetus has a moral right not to be aborted.

Study Questions

1. What is an acceptable level of risk in *Driving*? That is, roughly how certain must you be that driving home will not kill someone else for it to be morally permissible to drive home?
2. If you adopt a policy of always doing what you think is morally right, can you be criticised?
3. Are there any actions that would be *so* wrong, if wrong at all, that we should refrain from them if we have any doubt about whether they are wrong? Do any of the above cases qualify?

¹² <https://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities>

5. Pandemic Priorities

COVID-19 may be just the tip of the iceberg. According to some recent estimates, there is a one-in-thirty chance that within the next 100 years a pandemic will cause humanity to go extinct.¹³

Imagine the following scenario. A group of nations is debating how to spend their limited resources in the ongoing fight against pandemics. They have eliminated all but two options:

(A) Spend the money on preventing a variant of COVID-19 from causing two million deaths next year.

(B) Spend the money on significantly reducing the one-in-thirty chance mentioned above.

Delegates in favour of (B) argue that two million deaths is miniscule next to human extinction. Extinction destroys humanity's long term potential, which may be astronomically good—quintillions of people could thrive over many future generations.

Delegates in favour of (A) respond that the quintillions of possible future people are relatively unimportant. While we have moral duties to save people from death, we do not have duties to ensure people come into existence in the first place.

Study questions

1. Do we have duties to ensure that humanity doesn't come to an end?
2. Should the group of nations decide (in part) on the basis of *expected value*? That is, should they evaluate (A) and (B) by multiplying the chance of success by the value of success? For instance: a 95% chance of saving two million lives has the expected value of saving 1,900,000 lives; a 0.01% chance of saving eight billion lives has the expected value of saving 800,000 lives.
3. Should the nations choose (A) or (B), all things considered?

¹³ Toby Ord, *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), Ch.5.

6. Pets as Christmas Gifts

Dogs Trust, one of the leading dog charities in Ireland, urged people not to buy dogs for Christmas in 2021. This announcement came after they experienced an 82% increase in rehoming demands in 2021, with behavioural issues being cited by owners as the main reason for giving their dog away.¹⁴

This spike in adoptions, which is often heightened around the Christmas period, can lead to two issues. First, people might unknowingly buy pets from unscrupulous sellers, who breed pets in terrible conditions (in places also known as ‘puppy farms’). Puppies and kittens that are bred in low-welfare conditions are often separated from their mothers too soon, which can lead to severe health and behavioural problems.¹⁵ Second, animals bought as a Christmas gift are often bought impulsively, with people miscalculating how much care they require, or not being fully aware whether the intended gift recipient is willing and able to put in the work necessary to take good care of a pet, thus leading to animals being brought back to the shelter after the holiday period.¹⁶ This last consideration led multiple animal shelters in Germany to impose a ban on adoptions during the Christmas period in 2018.¹⁷

Study Questions

1. Should the UK government introduce a ban on adopting pets (whether adopting them from a shelter or buying them through a breeder or a particular) in December?
2. Do people have a responsibility to not get a pet for someone as a surprise gift?
3. Do prospective pet owners have a moral responsibility to not buy kittens and puppies from breeders given that high demand in pets increases low-welfare breeding conditions?

¹⁴ <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2021/1214/1266675-dogs-trust/>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dont-get-petfished-this-christmas-chief-veterinary-officer-warns-the-public-about-deceitful-pet-sellers>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46522116>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46522116>

7. Streaming justice

In most countries courtrooms are open to the public when the case doesn't involve sensitive information and when there aren't serious concerns about the safety of the participants. There are many arguments for this: if anyone can access courtrooms, then citizens can monitor the behaviour of people who participate in trials. This increases citizens' trust in the legal system and institutions in general, reminds judges and juries of their responsibilities, and discourages witnesses from lying.

For the same reasons, one might argue that for the sake of accessibility trials should be streamed on television or the internet. Television streaming has been implemented in the High Court of Australia¹⁸ and the Crown Court plans to follow as soon as the pandemic allows it.¹⁹

However, there are some worries. Televising trials may change the primary audience of the case from the parties involved to external spectators, increasing the risk of trials getting politicized and court members focusing more on public opinion than on the case itself. Furthermore, the stigmatization of those found guilty would increase in this scenario. Relatedly, while it might be harder to misrepresent an event of which there is a complete, accessible public record, there is also the possibility that the existence of such a record might provide more fodder for sensationalized media coverage.²⁰

Study Questions

1. Among trials for which there are no concerns about sensitive information or the safety of the participants, are some more appropriate for streaming than others?
2. Should any trials be streamed?
3. If you think some trials should be streamed, do you think any measures should be put in place to minimise the drawbacks mentioned above?

¹⁸ <https://www.hcourt.gov.au/cases/recent-av-recordings>

¹⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/637/introduction/made>

²⁰ For a debate on this topic between Daniel M. Kolkey, legal affairs secretary, and Bryan Goebel, president of the Central California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, see <https://archive.calbar.ca.gov/archive/calbar/2cbj/96feb/2cbj19.htm>

8. Work From Home and Disability

In August 2020, UNISON, the largest union for people working in the public service, published a report showing that the majority of employees with disabilities had been more productive when working from home and took fewer days off sick compared to when they had to work in the office. The union has called for working from home to count as a 'reasonable adjustment' that employees with disabilities have a right to under the Equality Act 2010.²¹ More recently, a report published in October 2021 by TUC (Trades Union Congress) recommends that the UK Government should act to ensure that workers with disabilities who worked from home during the pandemic can continue to do so. Under their recommendation, access to flexible working (working from home or from the office) should count as a reasonable adjustment.²²

Enabling workers with disabilities to work from home might come with difficulties: if the employee lacks the proper technological set-up (good broadband signal, good microphone, computer, etc.) to be able to work from home, they might not be able to work as effectively from home as they could from the office. However, if working from home counts as a reasonable adjustment, then employers would be required to pay for the office equipment to work from home.

Study Questions

1. Should working from home count as a reasonable adjustment that employees with disabilities can request from their employer?
2. In the UK, only 53.7% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 82% of non-disabled people.²³ Should the government require companies and institutions to offer and advertise work-from-home jobs, where feasible, in order to close the disability employment gap?

²¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/2/crossheading/adjustments-for-disabled-persons>

²² <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/disabled-workers-access-flexible-working-reasonable-adjustment>

²³ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/disability-pay-and-employment-gaps-2020>

9. Mobile Phone Bans in Schools

A mobile phone puts the accumulated knowledge of the human species in your pocket. It seems crazy to want to deprive anyone of a tool like that. However, a variety of studies have found an association between mobile phone use and anxiety and other mental health problems.²⁴

Some benefits and drawbacks of mobile phones are specific to schools. On the one hand, for instance, mobile phones can be useful for doing research on school assignments. But on the other hand, students need to concentrate on what their teachers are saying, and phones can be a distraction. In light of these concerns and others, former Education Secretary Gavin Williamson proposed in June that mobile phones be banned in schools.²⁵

At least two schools have tried this on their own initiative, with the head teachers emerging very pleased with the results. Kilgraston School attributed its exceptional exam results in 2019 to its ban, while Glenalmond College said that its ban led to better time management and improved social skills among its student body.²⁶

Sceptics suggest that student distraction is a perennial problem and therefore cannot be chalked up to mobile phone use. Furthermore, they believe that a ban is a blunt instrument for achieving whatever goods might come from reduced mobile phone use.²⁷ One might also raise a concern about infringing the liberty of young adults.

Study Questions

1. How ought the rudeness (or lack thereof) of using a mobile phone while one's teacher teaches play into this issue?
2. Some students can manage their own mobile phone use in a way that avoids negative consequences for their mental health, communications skills, and academic performance. Is it wrong to restrict their mobile phone use for the sake of the rest of the students?
3. If a school sincerely believes a mobile phone ban to be in the best interest of its students, does it have the right to impose one?

²⁴ See, e.g., Christoph Augner, et al, "The Association between Problematic Smartphone Use and Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression—a Meta-Analysis", *Journal of Public Health* (2021), pp. 1-9. Some such studies focus specifically on children and adolescents—e.g., Maya Sahu, Sailaxmi Gandhi, and Manoj Kumar Sharma, "Mobile Phone Addiction Among Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review", *Journal of Addictions Nursing* 30 (2019): 261-8.

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/29/education-secretary-wants-ban-on-mobile-phones-in-english-schools>

²⁶ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/phone-ban-helps-school-to-best-results-in-5-years-05xj9b3ck>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/aug/16/plan-to-ban-phones-from-classrooms-is-out-of-touch-say-uk-school-leaders>

10. Rescuing Migrants at Sea

The movement of undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers from Africa and the Middle East continues to grab headlines, especially in those European countries where the migrants tend to want to settle. Many migrants have little choice but to make a sea crossing at some point along their journey in order to get to their desired country. These crossings, however, are often extremely dangerous, especially in the rickety boats and rafts that are typically available to migrants.

Tragically, tens of thousands of migrants die at sea every year. In the Central Mediterranean alone there have been more than 17,000 documented deaths since 2014.²⁸ This is partly a result of a mid-decade policy change by the European Union and its member states—from setting up search-and-rescue efforts to enacting policies of non-assistance and criminalising private search-and-rescue missions.²⁹

One of the claims offered in favour of this policy shift was that search-and-rescue missions constitute a ‘pull factor’; in other words, they encourage migrants to take a chance on the crossing and thus, contrary to their intentions, actually *increase* deaths at sea. This claim has now been debunked.

Suppose, however, that the claim was true.

Study Questions

1. You are the captain of a Mediterranean fishing trawler and you encounter a sinking boat full of migrants who will die if you don’t rescue them. You know that such rescues often receive press coverage, so you can imagine that it’s at least possible that your rescuing of these migrants could influence the decision of other migrants whether to risk the crossing. How strongly should this bear on your decision whether to go ahead with the rescue? (Assume here that it’s legal for you to decline to rescue the migrants.)

2. You are the head of a large, well-known charity whose mission is to conduct search-and-rescue missions for migrants making the Central Mediterranean crossing. You have just found out that the ‘pull factor’ claim is true. Should you shut down your organisation?

²⁸ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

²⁹ <https://esrc.ukri.org/news-events-and-publications/evidence-briefings/improving-policy-for-search-and-rescue-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-and-identifying-the-dead/>

11. Sleep-Outs

A sleep-out is an event in which people sleep outdoors for one night as a way of increasing awareness of homelessness and raising money for charities that are fighting it. In December 2018 the charity Social Bite organised simultaneous sleep-outs in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen, complete with musical and comedy acts from big-name performers.³⁰ This was followed a year later by the “World’s Big Sleep Out”, with sleep-outs in large cities across the world on a single night.³¹ Many of these sleep-outs were held in prime urban locations where rough sleeping would generally be policed and included security, hospitality, and hygienic services.

Sleep-out critics argue that people participating in such events are safe, entertained, and have high-quality sleeping bags, and therefore experience nothing like real homelessness—a point conceded by the head of Social Bite.³² This has led some critics to label such events “patronising” to people who are actually experiencing homelessness.³³

Study Questions

1. Do sleep-outs convey a message about homelessness that people experiencing homelessness might reasonably find objectionable? Do they make light of something that should be taken seriously?
2. Suppose Shauna participates in a sleep-out and emerges from it with a heightened sense of the moral urgency of homelessness. Is it a sign of bad character in Shauna that it took participating in a sleep-out for her to reach this attitude?
3. Is this a case in which the ends justify the means? Sleep-outs do, after all, raise money that is then ploughed into efforts to end homelessness.

³⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-46484357>

³¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50703366>

³² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/07/nyregion/homelessness-sleepout-times-square.html>

³³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-46484357>