

A method for making decisions *

Much of our confidence in science stems from the fact that there are commonly agreed upon methods for assessing empirical claims. Are there analogous methods in ethics for assessing normative claims?

1. Two examples

Plagiarism
Biotechnology

2. A seven-step method in ethics

- 1) Start with moral intuitions.
- 2) Screen them for egoistic bias and self-deception.
- 3) State screened intuitions as particular moral judgments.
- 4) Identify factual and normative reasons and form into deductive arguments.
- 5) Supply missing premises.
- 6) Check the argument for validity.
- 7) Check the argument for soundness.

3. Two examples

a) PLAGIARISM

“You should not report my case of plagiarism to the Dean.”

b) GM FOODS

“Genetically modified foods are risky, unnatural, and a form of playing God.”

Do ethicists have a method for evaluating such claims?

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Provisional definitions

Science: a collection of descriptive disciplines aimed at explaining how the world *is*. These disciplines try to answer the question, What laws and regularities govern the natural world?

Ethics: a collection of normative disciplines aimed at prescribing how the human world *ought to be*. These disciplines try to answer the question, What laws should govern human behavior?

Initial advice

Watch language carefully. The way in which we describe situations may dramatically affect the conclusions we reach. George takes a notebook home from the lab. How best to describe the situation initially? “George stole a notebook to cheat on his project?” or “George took a notebook home with him to complete his project?”

Explain facts and values as clearly as possible, attending carefully to the difference between empirical claims and ethical principles.

1. Start with moral intuitions

Moral intuitions are beliefs arising unreflectively from one's background. These beliefs express one's values and direct one toward actions, decisions, or policies.

Write a sentence stating each individual's moral intuition.

a) PLAGIARISM

Sue may have many intuitions that, in her mind, excuse her act of plagiarism. Write one here:

<ANSWER> “My case should be excused because it is the first time I’ve cheated and I didn’t really mean to do it.”

b) GM FOODS

Steve may have many moral intuitions supporting his opposition to GM foods. Write one here:

2. Screen intuitions for egoistic bias and self-deception

Egoistic bias is unjustifiable self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism, or lack of fit with one's categorical interests. Self-deception is the act of misleading oneself to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid. In this step we screen our intuitions against our natural human tendencies to make biased evaluations of ambiguous data; to misinterpret or over-interpret incomplete or unrepresentative data; and to weigh more heavily evidence that confirms our favorite hypotheses without seeking out potentially disconfirming evidence.

Write a question Sue and Steve might ask themselves as a checking procedure against egoistic bias.

Write another question they might ask as a checking procedure against self-deception.

a) PLAGIARISM

Sue: "You should not report my case of plagiarism to the Dean."

Egoistic bias: _____

Self-deception: _____

<ANSWER>

Egoistic bias:

"If I plagiarize, will I accomplish my goal of obtaining my degree?"

Self-deception:

"Is my fear of punishment skewing my perception of what I did?"

"Do I stand to lose my parents' financial support if the case is reported to the Dean?"

b) GM FOODS

Steve: "Genetically modified foods are risky, unnatural, and a form of playing God."

Egoistic bias: _____

Self-deception: _____

3. State screened intuitions as particular moral judgments

Particular moral judgments are moral intuitions that have survived screening for bias and egoistic incoherence and are supported by at least one (screened) reason.

- è Underline the clause, sentence, or group of sentences that states the conclusion of each of the following arguments.
- è Put brackets around the key word that indicates the conclusion is to follow. Key words for conclusions include: therefore, consequently, so, hence, and “it follows that . . .”

a) PLAGIARISM

Suppose that after screening for bias, Sue changes her view to:

“Most people of my ethnic background think that plagiarism is acceptable, therefore, my case should not be reported to the Dean.”

What is her conclusion now? Find the key word that indicates a conclusion is about to follow, and put it in brackets. Then, underline the conclusion:

Most people of my ethnic background think that plagiarism is acceptable, therefore, my case should not be reported to the Dean.

<ANSWER>

Most people of my ethnic background think that plagiarism is acceptable {therefore} my case should not be reported to the Dean.

b) GM FOODS

Genetic modification of foods allows us to cross species boundaries in unnatural ways. We should not do unnatural things. Therefore, we should not produce genetically modified foods.

Call the underlined conclusions, "particular moral judgments," or *PMJs*.

4. Identify factual and normative reasons, and form into deductive arguments.

Reasons are premises, **factual** and **normative**, lending support to PMJs.

Factual premises make claims about how the world **is**.

Key phrases: "people think," "studies show," etc.

Normative premises make claims about how the human world **ought to be**.

Key words: "should," "ought," etc.

a) PLAGIARISM

“Most people of my ethnic background think that plagiarism is acceptable; {therefore} my case should not be reported to the Dean.”

PMJ: *My case should not be reported to the Dean.*

Write one **factual premise** that supports the PMJ:

<ANSWER> *"Seventy eight percent of students from my country think my work is not a case of plagiarism."*

Write one **normative premise** that supports the PMJ:

<ANSWER> *"Cases of plagiarism should not be reported if a majority of the students from the plagiarizer's country think the work is not plagiarized."*

b) BIOTECHNOLOGY

Genetic modification of foods allows us to cross species boundaries in unnatural ways. We should not do unnatural things. Therefore, we should not produce genetically modified foods (PMJ).

Factual premise that supports the PMJ:

Normative premise that supports the PMJ:

5. Supply missing premises.

Arguers often forget to supply premises (enthymemes). When this happens, we say that a key premise is missing, or implicit. Professionalism here requires that we assist the arguer, applying the "principle of charity." The principle of charity holds that we ought to try to make an argument as clear and strong as possible before criticizing it.

Examine the following arguments. Supply the missing premises.

Premise: Students who copy and paste are always acting dishonestly.

Conclusion: It follows that if you copy and paste your actions should be reported to the Dean.

Missing premise: _____

Premise: It's morally wrong to treat human beings as mere objects.

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

Missing premise: _____

Premise: Releasing GMOs into the environment may pollute the genome.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to release GMOs into the environment.

Missing premise: _____

Premise: To insert a human gene into a pig is to cross a species boundary.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to insert a human gene into a pig.

Missing premise: _____

6. Check the argument for validity

An argument is valid if and only if it is not logically possible for its conclusion to be false when all of its premises are true.

Which of the following arguments are valid? Write "V" for valid, or "I" for invalid.

_____ All whales are fish. All fish are cold-blooded. Therefore, all whales are cold-blooded.

_____ All whales are fish. All fish live in water. So, all whales live in water.

_____ All whales are fish. All fish suckle their young. Therefore, all whales suckle their young.

_____ All whales are mammals. All mammals suckle their young. So all whales suckle their young

a) PLAGIARISM

1. Most students believe that plagiarizing 3 sentences is not ethically wrong.
2. Sue plagiarized 3 sentences.
3. Instructors should not be required to report acts of plagiarism if most students think that the act is not ethically wrong.
4. Therefore, the instructor in Sue's case should not be required to report the case.

_____ (V or I ?)

b) GM FOODS

1. Steve thinks it is unnatural to produce GM foods.
2. It is unnatural to produce GM foods.
3. We should not perform unnatural acts.
4. Therefore, we should not produce GM foods.

_____ (V or I ?)

Every argument on this page is valid; the conclusions cannot be false if the premises are true.

Once you have constructed a valid argument, check it for soundness.

7. Check for soundness

A sound argument (a) must be valid and, (b) all of its premises must be true or justifiable.

Normative premises typically are NOT justifiable if they lead to counterintuitive results. For example, the normative premise “We should not perform unnatural acts” is not justifiable because it leads to the conclusion that we should not fly in airplanes, since flying is unnatural to human beings. But the conclusion “we should not fly in airplanes” seems wildly counterintuitive, and this implication provides us with a reason to reject the premise.

Write T, F, or U (for "unjustifiable") in front of each premise. Any argument containing a false or unjustifiable premise is **unsound**. Which of these arguments--all of which are valid--are unsound?

a) PLAGIARISM

- _____ 1. Most students believe that plagiarizing 3 sentences is not ethically wrong.
- _____ 2. Sue plagiarized 3 sentences.
- _____ 3. Instructors should not be required to report acts of plagiarism if most students think that the act is not ethically wrong.
- _____ 4. Therefore, the instructor in Sue’s case should not be required to report the case.

<ANSWER>

- T _____ 1. Most students believe that plagiarizing 3 sentences is not ethically wrong.
- T _____ 2. Sue plagiarized 3 sentences.
- U _____ 3. Instructors shouldn't be required to report acts of plagiarism if most students think that act is not ethically wrong.
COUNTERINTUITIVE RESULT: Majority opinions would determine morality. "Might would make right."
- U _____ 4. Therefore, the instructor in Sue’s case should not be required to report the case.

b) GM FOODS

- _____ 1. It is unnatural to produce GM foods.
- _____ 2. We should not perform unnatural acts.
- _____ 3. Therefore, we should not produce GM foods.

Normative premises typically ARE justifiable if they lead to conclusions that MATCH OUR SCREENED INTUITIONS and CAN BE JUSTIFIED BY MORE THAN ONE ETHICAL THEORY. The normative premise, “We should not withhold penicillin from African-American men in syphilis trials after 1960” is justifiable because it is intuitively defensible and defensible on the grounds of virtue theory, utilitarianism, and rights theory.

c) DUTY TO AID

- _____ 1. Death by starvation is very bad.
- _____ 2. By sending substantial amounts of money for famine relief, we can prevent death by starvation without sacrificing anything of comparable moral worth.
- _____ 3. If we can prevent something very bad from happening by doing X, and if we can do X without sacrificing something of comparable moral worth, then we have a moral duty to do X.
- _____ 4. Therefore we have a moral duty to send substantial amounts of money for famine relief.