

# Intro to Ethics

R. D. Walsh, Ph.D.

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A sunset scene with a warm orange and yellow sky. Several birds are in flight, silhouetted against the bright light. In the foreground, there is a field of dry, brown grass and two strands of barbed wire stretching across the frame. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

# CHAPTER 1

## MORAL PHILOSOPHY

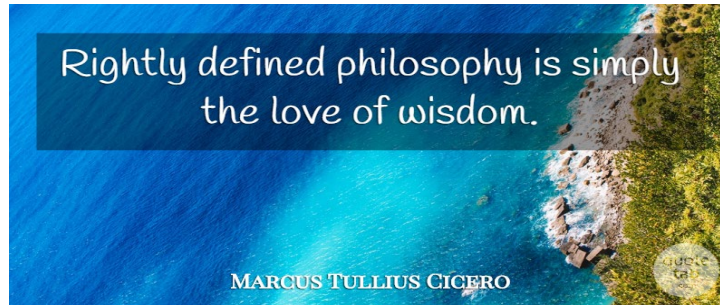
### Introduction

**I**n this chapter of *Intro to Ethics*, we will investigate the way in which ethics (understood as a reflective, rational practice aimed at your personal moral growth and development) emerged out of ancient Greek philosophical schools and then influenced the development of Western culture and morality down to our present day. Ethics is a field of study that is continuing to grow and develop. This chapter will highlight some of the key aspects of ethical theory and practice from the history of that development.

Of course, it will be impossible to survey the entire field of ethics in this chapter. And such an aspiration would be inconsistent with the more practical goal of this textbook, which is to provide tools and exercises aimed at your personal moral growth and development. Therefore, instead of attempting to provide a comprehensive account of the history of ethics, this textbook will focus on what you need to engage in ethics practice effectively in your everyday ordinary life.

## Philosophy: the birthplace of Ethics

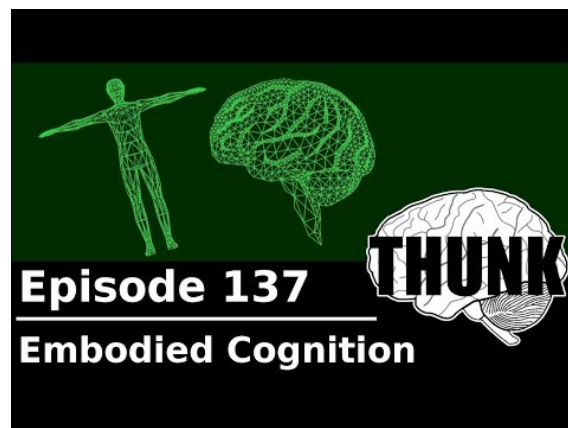
Philosophy, as the well-known literal definition of the term suggests, is the love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*). But how that practice of loving wisdom works in everyday practice, and what, exactly, is meant by both the terms “love” and “wisdom” as the goal of that practice, is not immediately clear from the literal definition of the term “philosophy.” However, the idea that philosophy is the love of wisdom does open the door to the phenomenon of moral philosophy and



gets us going in the right direction. But what is wisdom? And how and why should we love it? We will have to take a roundabout course to get to answers to those questions.

Let’s try another approach. From a practical perspective, we could say that philosophy uses reason to understand reality and answer fundamental questions about knowledge, life, morality and human nature. Note the emphasis on the *practice* of using reason and logic in doing philosophical ‘research’. It will be helpful to look more closely at what we mean by reason or reasoning, and, more generally, rationality. Are reason and rationality sufficient in the realm of morality for determining correct moral action? We will need to question this idea. Social Psychology, for example, will show us that non-rational, bodily aspects of experience, and unconscious, situational nudges of all kinds, influence how we act and what we decide – even though we might feel we are acting autonomously and rationally. So, we will need to look beyond the merely rational to understand what ethics is all about.

For example, the relatively new field of Embodied Cognition argues that our subjective, bodily experiences are crucial to the process of cognitive reasoning. Check out the brief video below. (8:19)



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Sometimes it is said that philosophy seeks to know the essential nature of things. To seek the essence of a thing means being able to see what is happening with that particular thing as it is, free from bias and prejudice. It means allowing the phenomenon (whatever we are considering) to appear as it is rather than as we want it to be. Easier said than done.

Right now, for example, as we are trying to see *what philosophy is*, it would be easy to come up with an arbitrary, abstract definition from the dictionary and then impose that definition on the idea of philosophy and announce: Okay, here is what philosophy “is” essentially. But, such an authoritarian approach to getting at the “essence” of philosophy (or anything else) might miss it altogether.

Rather, the phenomenological approach used in this text (which will be explained in detail later in the course) will look at things such as “philosophy” from various *perspectives*, as we are doing right now, without conceding that any one perspective is the absolutely right or only correct perspective. We will have to see how this *perspectival approach* to Ethics avoids falling into moral relativism (the idea that any one perspective is the absolutely right perspective).

Let me just add here that for me, personally, philosophy is *a way of life* that involves putting into practice every day the moral ideas, beliefs and values that result from conscious reflection and deliberation and always oriented toward living the best possible life. What I like about this definition is the way that philosophical practice is understood to be a creative part of my active, engaged, everyday life in the world with other people and not merely some abstract bunch of ideas floating in the clouds somewhere.

**The study and practice of philosophy should produce something of real, practical value for you in your everyday life. Otherwise, why bother?**

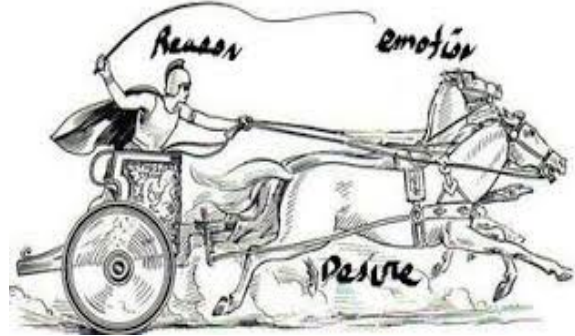
### Why Should you Study Ethics?



Debra Satz, a professor of Ethics in Society at Stanford University, and Rob Reich, the program's director, underline the benefits of studying ethics. (1:48)

## Should Reason Lead the Way?

Broadening the ethical horizon of students for practical success in the world was certainly the purpose of rational discourse for the early Greek philosophers. But, unlike the idea of Embodied Reasoning presented above, moral decision making was understood to be guided by the *Logos*, meaning reason or logic. The passions, emotions, and desires were thought to be a hindrance to reasoning.



This pre-eminence of rationality for the Greeks is reflected in Plato's image of the human soul depicted as a chariot pulled by two cantankerous horses. The two horses represent the non-rational aspects of human beings, passion, emotion, desire, etc. The charioteer represents Reason whose job is to tame and control the non-rational horses and make them amenable to control.

Modern Social Psychology, however, has repeatedly demonstrated that our moral value orientation and the moral action that flows from it are often greatly influenced by unconscious situational factors, a study we will take up directly in Chapter 2. This will lead us to an idea of *bounded rationality*, as opposed to strict or pure rationality, which is more consistent with the kind of moral deliberation in which we normally engage every day.

**The idea of *bounded rationality* is that our reasoning at any point and time is influenced or “bounded” by non-rational elements such as setting, situation, emotion, social conditioning, previous knowledge, nudges, other people, etc. (Cf. with ‘embodied cognition’ above)**

## Ethics and Morality

### Ethics

Surely you have noticed that in the English language the terms “ethics” and “morality” are often conflated and used interchangeably, as if they were synonyms, which they are not, at least from a philosophical perspective. Yet, neither are they defined consistently by philosophers.

The terms “ethics” and “morality” are frequently thrown about in conversations and philosophical arguments vaguely and imprecisely.

In order to avoid such confusion in our studies, let me suggest that we agree to a conventional distinction between the terms “ethics” and “morality” in order to facilitate our investigations.

*“Ethics” is a rational, reflective practice aimed at achieving theoretical clarification and understanding of how we should act morally to live the best possible life. In short...*

## Ethics is the study of morality

We will need to look more carefully at the nature, structure, and practice of ethical thinking, but, generally, ethics can be understood as a practice of reflective thinking about morality. What, then, is morality?

(My) Morality

The reason I like to sometimes include the parenthesized term “(My)” when talking about morality is to keep in mind that **morality, from an existential perspective, is a built-in ‘dimension’ or ‘aspect’ of the whole person** and not some kind of free-floating, depersonalized, abstract object of thought floating around inner space somewhere. *Morality is always embodied human responsiveness occurring in a specific place, at a specific time, about a definite something, for a particular person.*

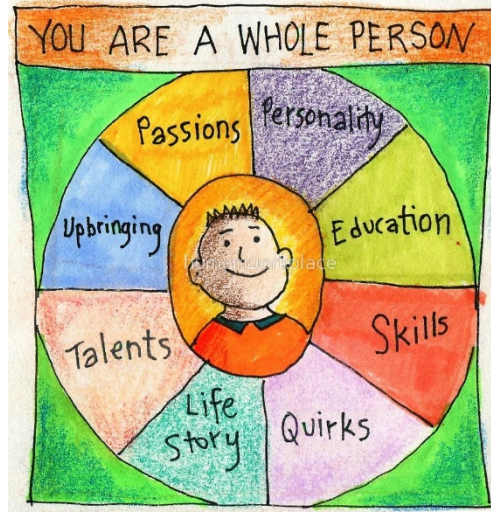
Morality is all of your ideas, beliefs, values, feelings, emotions, norms, principles, conventions ... all of your experiences and conditioned responses from early childhood until now, your whole personal history, including rational rules and emotional paradigms by which you deliberate and make moral evaluations and judgments every day as you strive to live the best possible life.

## Morality is the way in which you make moral judgments and take moral action

Your moral value orientation, although generally stable across situations, is thoroughly fluid, dynamic and constantly being reconfigured by new ideas, situations, experiences, life challenges, etc.

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Morality is influenced at every moment by non-rational experiences. Thus, morality involves **moral sensitivity, moral awareness, moral courage or fear, moral will or conviction, moral strength, moral confidence, moral flexibility, moral firmness or rigidity, moral openness to new ideas, moral daring, moral limits, and other such attitudinal, unconscious, and affective characteristics of persons.**



In short, your morality is essentially the whole of who you are. You and I are moral through and through and not only a moral being occasionally or partially.

Thus, contrary to the behaviorist perspective, morality cannot be reduced entirely to conditioned behavior. Neither is morality an instrument or a tool that a value-neutral "I" merely uses. Morality itself is not a coat that can be put on or taken off. From this dynamic perspective, **the basic characteristics of morality must be understood as action-oriented predilections that are essential dispositions connected to your historical embodiment in the world and which apply to you as a whole person.** Let's take a closer look at some of the more important 'components' of your morality.







## Immediate lived experience

We all form our basic judgments about ourselves and the world from the impressions of *immediate lived experience*. Immediate lived experience consists of intuited ‘sense impressions’ prior to full consciousness and reflection, before they have become “this” or “that;” that is, before linguistic/conceptual representation. You can learn to make lived experience more conscious.



In this brief video (2:42), Leah Harris, MA, a suicide attempt survivor and trainer with the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, provides a brief explanation of “lived experience”. What she says here from a therapeutic perspective is also completely applicable to how we go about making moral judgments. Our “lived experience” is what informs our moral judgments just as much as our rational reflection.

Immediate lived experience is not yet at the level of reflection or rational judgment since it is pre-rational and pre-conceptual (like tacit knowledge, hunches, gut-feelings, intuition, passion, and, for the most part, emotion—before we have become aware of it as such), but there could be no judgment possible if we had not experienced *something* prior to our judgment about what that something *is*. Philosophical study should help you become more conscious of lived experience.

Intuited sense impressions become experience only after we have judged them to be “this particular thing” or “that particular thing,” which we do mostly unconsciously as part of our linguistically structured experience of the world. We are doing this all the time.

Human beings are judging beings *par excellence*. Our entire experience of ourselves and our world results from judgments we have made and are making. Making reasonable judgments both requires rationality and is at the very heart of what it means to be a rational human being. Yet, you can also make judgments non-rationally. Doing what you feel like doing is an obvious example. This can be risky, morally speaking. One simple test: You know your moral judgment is rational when you can give meaningful reasons to support it, that is, reasons that would make sense to a reasonable person. You know your judgments and actions are non-rational when you can’t give meaningful reasons for them.

## Moral Absolutism and Moral Relativism

### Moral Absolutism

**Moral Absolutism (sometimes referred to as “moral realism”) is the belief that there is an absolute moral standard against which moral questions can be judged with complete certitude.** From this perspective, actions can be judged to be right or wrong regardless of the context, consequences, or situation. From an absolutist perspective, actions are inherently moral or immoral regardless of the beliefs and goals of the individual, society, historical period, or culture that engages in the actions. If something is wrong, it is always wrong, at all times and in all places.

Thus, an absolutist might hold, for example, that morals are inherent in the laws of the universe because they have been put there by an absolute creative energy, force or deity. These absolute laws, then, are also thought to be reflected in the nature of human beings since humans are also a part of the natural order. To act morally from this **natural law perspective**, then, is to conform your human will to the absolute will of the laws of the cosmos, understood usually as reflecting the will of God or some other fundamental source of absolute certitude, such as “Nature.” (As we will see later in the course, both deontology and teleological theories are absolutist.)

### Moral Relativism

**Moral relativism asserts that there are no absolute standards.** Rather, moral judgments are true or false relative to some particular standpoint, such as a culture or a historical period, as in *cultural relativism*; or that of a particular person, as in *subjective relativism* or *subjectivism*. Also, from a relativist perspective no standpoint is uniquely privileged over any others since there is no absolute standard by which to judge such privilege.

One common interpretation of subjective relativism asserts that you must determine what is right for yourself, and whatever you determine to be right will be right for you. The same action that is morally correct for you may not be morally correct for another person. Moral judgment would be relative to each situation and each person. From this relativist perspective, there would be no way to determine which judgment is correct in an absolute, rational, objective, situation-independent way.

**SITUATED RELATIVISM ... It is difficult to deny that relativism does, to a certain degree, represent the existential situation of the moral person, despite absolutist attempts to show otherwise. However, everyday relativism is not the relativism of an isolated, sovereign and autonomous human being, detached from situational influences and making moral decisions in a vacuum of separateness from others and the human world in which we all co-exist. Rather, the relativist moral subject is always situated in a human context and immersed in a rich web of moral influences, contexts, interactions, practices, happenings and relationships which have a more or less conscious impact on moral sensitivity and awareness, moral responsiveness, moral courage, and willingness to act, and my whole sense of who I am from a moral perspective.**

The moral subject is always situated in a human context and immersed in a rich web of moral influences, contexts, interactions, practices, happenings and relationships...

Thus, contrary to subjective relativism, the assertion that the lack of an *absolute* foundation means that we are condemned to a relativism where anything goes, is incorrect in my view. There is an alternative to a pure subjective relativism that presents itself out of our everyday natural immersion in a rich web of situated, unique, interpersonal moral relationships and practices with others, a contextual, social framework apart from which morality could not exist.



## Intersubjective relativism

A relativist moral position can have an existential, intersubjective moral foundation. This would be a kind of “**relational or intersubjective relativity**” or relational ethics grounded in the thoroughgoing human-interdependence of the social world in which we live. I am irrevocably linked to other persons for my sense of self and my relation to the world. This essential connectedness with other people is an important context for my own unique moral value orientation.

We must come to our own subjective moral decisions, yes, but we always do so within the horizon of our intuited perception of the permitted or proscribed actions within any given social orientation in which we participate, such as family, a hometown community, school, church or

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business organization. We do this mostly in an unconscious way, adapting our responsiveness to our perception of expectations communicated tacitly within the various social connections that structure our daily life.

Thus, holding a relativist moral position does not necessarily foreclose on the need for continual formation, re-formation and articulation of our fundamental moral value orientation in connection to the value terms of the many complex practices in which we interact with others every day.

**The argument will be presented throughout this text that human persons are grounded morally in and through our relationships with others. Being morally grounded in our basic connectedness to other people happens mostly in a pre-conscious 'relation' of responsiveness to others that is essential to our own unique moral self-formation. This perspective will be investigated in more detail in later chapters.**

### Moral Pluralism: a perspectival approach to morality

**Moral pluralism** is a general framework for arriving at sound moral judgments. The moral pluralist argues that because moral issues, problems and dilemmas can be highly complex, we likewise need a complex set of tools with which to manage complicated moral choices.

**The moral pluralist urges that, when confronted with the need for a reasoned moral decision, you should consider and apply as many ethical concepts, principles, perspectives and theories as are appropriate to see, evaluate and resolve the moral issue.**

A failure to engage in a plurality of considerations and applications may result in an inadequate and ineffective moral analysis and moral judgment.



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There is an app that can be downloaded to your smartphone that helps you make moral decisions. It was rolled out by the [Markkula Center for Applied Ethics](#) at Santa Clara University in conjunction with Apple a while back. This app can help with moral decisions, but it can't make a moral decision for you. It does encourage a pluralist approach by guiding users to evaluate moral decisions from different perspectives.

Generally, the moral pluralist resists quick fixes to moral questions. This is the case because the pluralist understands that the realities of life are such that no single formula can embrace all of the many unique and complex moral issues, problems and dilemmas that you will be faced with. **So, the moral pluralist holds that a more comprehensive application of the concepts, principles and theories that comprise the history of ethics is a necessary part of good moral decision-making.**

There are no easy answers to many of the moral challenges that confront us in our everyday life, and moral complexity can lead to moral perplexity. This is especially likely to happen when one is locked into a single, rigid moral perspective within a mostly unconscious conventional framework driven by emotion. No single approach to moral deliberation is right for all moral problems in all situations. Seeing things from different sides can expand your horizon of possibility and thereby lead to making better moral judgments. And that should improve your chances of achieving the best possible life.

### A Brief Overview of Chapter 1

Two ideas from the Introduction to *Intro to Ethics* that you should be familiar with are **"the best possible life"** and **"personal moral power."**

All rational beings desire to live the best possible life since it would be irrational not to desire this, even when what we think is the best thing to do turns out not to be such a good thing after all. Robbing a bank might seem like it would be a good thing to do because you will get a lot of money, but when you get caught and sent to prison you might think otherwise.

It is up to you to determine what the best possible life is for you (the best possible thing to do in any given situation). This is a project that is presented in the text as a *way of life* since it is never finished. What do you think is the best possible life for you?

Personal moral power is your ability to achieve what you think is the best possible life. Personal moral power mostly involves making good judgments, but making good moral judgments also involves other things like moral sensitivity, moral assertiveness and moral courage.

From your reading of Chapter 1 you should be clear about the difference between **ethics** and **morality**. Ethics is a reflection on morality. Morality involves

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all of what goes into your making of moral judgments that are in harmony with your natural, rational desire to live the best possible life.

You should be able to explain the difference between ethics and morality, focusing mostly on morality. Morality is how we go about making moral judgments in the world every day. In the final analysis, I argue that morality involves the "whole person" since we do not make moral judgments with only a "part" of ourselves but with our whole self.

The section on the challenges to a strictly rational approach to ethics is important and will come up again repeatedly in the rest of the text. **The text argues that the most complete approach to ethics would involve both rational and non-rational dimensions of the person since both of these domains contribute to ethical decision making.**

The section on absolutism and relativism is particularly important. Absolutism is the idea that there is a moral standard that can be used to always make correct moral judgments. From a more personal perspective, **moral absolutism** is reflected in the attitude of the person who thinks they always know what the absolutely correct moral decision is in any situation. I will argue that we rarely, if ever, know what is morally correct with absolute certitude. Thus, we seem to be left with **moral relativism**, which asserts that there is no absolute moral standard, so moral judgments are always relative to something else, like how we feel or what is required by circumstances or a culture.

In response to moral relativism, I argue that there is an interpersonal moral standard, even though it is not an absolute standard in the traditional sense. There are **situational moral standards** that arise from our everyday associations and relations with social institutions and other people that we engage with every day. Our own moral value configuration is attuned to these situational factors. We adjust our moral value orientation as we move in and out of these various domains. Thus, these situational factors along with our own personal moral value reflections, create a relative or situational standard for our moral evaluations and action. We 'pick up' the situational cues for these moral value orientations intuitively and, often, unconsciously.

Finally, the section on **Moral Pluralism** is important because Pluralism is the recommended approach to doing ethics that is promoted throughout the text. You should be familiar with the requirements of this approach to moral reflection and deliberation and the justification for it. You should also be able to engage this

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approach to doing ethics in practice. Try it out when you are working with the scenario exercises that are presented at the end of each chapter.

### PRACTICE

#### TERMS TO KNOW

- Moral Philosophy
- Ethics
- Morality
- Business Ethics
- Virtue Ethics
- Deontological
- Teleological
- Utilitarianism
- Moral Absolutism
- Moral Relativism
- Moral Pluralism

#### TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERMS

*Exercise hint: If you really want to test your understanding of these terms, try this with a friend: First, explain to your willing friend one or more of the terms from the list above. Then, ask your friend to repeat your explanation back to you. Finally, see how close your friend's restatement matches your own understanding. Discuss and bring your understandings into sync. Repeat the exercise. Anyway, you should be able to give brief explanations of these key terms.*

#### TRY ANSWERING THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1. Imagine you are explaining to an intelligent friend why it is beneficial to study philosophy as a preparation for a business career. What would you say?
2. What is ethics?
3. What is morality?
4. What is the importance of your ideas, beliefs, values, and principles for making successful moral judgments?
5. Think of a decision you made recently. What ideas, beliefs, values, and principles guided your decision-making?

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6. What is the value of moral theories? Why do we need them?
7. Which type of moral theory (deontology or teleology) would be more likely to support the following statement? “It is totally wrong to intentionally harm an innocent human being against their will, even if that harm would result in the cure for all cancer.” Explain your answer.
8. What is moral absolutism?
9. What is moral relativism?
10. How can situations and other people provide a kind of non-absolute foundation for our moral value configuration and moral action?
11. What is moral pluralism?

### REFLECTION EXERCISES

- 1) One way to find out about your own moral value orientation is to notice what you agree with and disagree with about what other people are doing or saying, especially about others’ actions. For example, say you notice an adult talking very harshly to a child in a public place, a store, for instance. You think the adult is belittling the child and this is not right. Reflecting on this, you will see that your response suggests that you have certain values about how children should be treated in public. What are those values? Try to give them specific names, if you can. What are your moral principles that support those values? Try using what you approve of and disapprove of in others to learn more about yourself. How do you feel about what you find out?
- 2) Think of a situation in your life where you believe that you see the whole picture and have a good idea of what is going on. Now try to see that situation from the perspectives of other specific people who are involved. How would they be likely to see what is going on? How would they describe it? How might they feel about it?
- 3) Check out the ancient Indian parable called “The Blind Men and the Elephant” (numerous versions on YouTube). How does this ancient parable illustrate the central idea of Moral Pluralism?
- 4) Here is a phenomenology exercise. Okay, you read Chapter 1. Thus, you had an experience of reading Chapter 1. In 300 words, describe the features of your experience of reading Chapter 1. You might begin by writing something like “When I first started reading Chapter 1, I thought... (I felt..., I wondered..., I hoped..., I just knew..., I remembered..., I feared..., I imagined..., etc., or whatever verb you choose) but after I had finished reading it I thought, felt, wondered, etc. Don’t think too much about it, just reflect



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on your experience and describe whatever comes into your mind about that experience. Let your description of your experience flow out without critical concern. You can always come back later and sort it all out, edit it, etc.

### SCENARIO EXERCISE

*General note on engaging the scenario exercises in this text: "The Terrorist Bomber" scenario below is a moral thought experiment meant to highlight an actual, real-life moral dilemma in which you might or could possibly find yourself involved. Imagine yourself as the official in the scenario who has decide whether to use torture or not. For it to be most effective, you should engage the scenario from your total moral orientation, both how you think and how you feel. Try to imagine the scenario as being real, not pretend or merely made-up. Empathize with the official (and the terrorist) as best you can. What would you really do? Of course, it is not merely an abstract, rational moral dilemma that the official is dealing with. There are also emotional, relational, and situational factors for him or her. Is it right to inflict harm on any person intentionally? What about the official's responsibility to the innocent people who might get hurt? What about the civil rights of the bomber? What does it feel like to be in such a bind? How do you think you would deal with it? Most importantly, how would you justify how you dealt with it?*

#### **The Terrorist Bomber**

A home-grown terrorist who has threatened to explode several bombs in crowded areas has been apprehended. Unfortunately, it is positively known that he has already planted the bombs and it is clearly established that they will go off in a short time. It is possible that hundreds, perhaps thousands of people may die and many more will be maimed and injured.

The authorities cannot make him divulge the location of the bombs by conventional methods. He refuses to say anything. He requests a lawyer to protect his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination since he is a U.S. citizen.

In exasperation, a high-level official suggests the use of torture. This would be illegal, of course (and it is illegal because it is thought to be immoral), but the official thinks that it is nevertheless the right thing to do in this desperate situation.

Do you agree or disagree? Why? If you agree, would you also agree that it would be morally justifiable to torture the terrorist's innocent wife if that is the *only* way to make him talk? If not, why not?

## Case Study: Cultural Relativism and Honor Killing

# CULTURAL RELATIVISM – IS HONOR KILLING IN PAKISTAN MORALLY ACCEPTABLE?

August 22, 2019 11:00PM

**Pakistan Should Not Again Fail 'Honor Killing' Victim**

*End Impunity of Family Murders of Women*



Members of civil society protest against a recent "honor" killing in Islamabad, Pakistan on May 29, 2014. © 2014 Reuters

In [July 2016](#), 26-year-old Qandeel Baloch was strangled to death by her brother, who said he killed her because she ["brought dishonor"](#) to their family and tribe through her flamboyant online videos and statements.

Qandeel's case received broad attention because of her celebrity. But Pakistani rights activists estimate that there are about 1,000 "honor killings" in Pakistan every year.

Convictions are rare for many reasons, yet critical is a loophole that allowed the legal heirs of the victim to pardon those responsible – who are usually also a relative.

Qandeel's killing prompted a widespread outcry in Pakistan, leading to legislative action and the promise of prompt prosecution. Parliament passed a law imposing harsher punishments for "honor killings" and [partially eliminated the pardon loophole](#).

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This raised hopes that the case would be a turning point for the Pakistani government, which has tolerated violence against – and even the murder of – women on “honor” grounds.

State prosecutors took the unusual step of charging Qandeel’s three brothers, including the one who confessed to killing her, with a [crime against the state](#). But the trial has dragged on. On August 21, [Qandeel’s parents asked the court to “forgive” her brothers](#), their lawyers arguing that since the [anti-honor killing law was passed after Qandeel’s death](#), it does not apply in her case. The next day, [the court rejected the parents’ pardon request](#).

Still, “honor killings” and pressure to pardon perpetrators seem to have continued unabated since the adoption of the law. There are no credible official figures on “honor killings” because they often go unreported or are passed off as suicide or natural deaths by family members. But as an indication, in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, at least 94 women were murdered by close family members in 2017.

Justice for Pakistani women requires a broader government effort, including more state prosecutions of “honor killings,” reformed criminal laws, and greater access for women and girls to safe emergency shelters and other services when they report risks from their family.

The government should end a system in which a woman’s life is considered worthless and family members can kill with impunity.

Pakistan should not fail Qandeel again.



**Murdered social media star Qandeel Baloch posted images of herself that few Pakistani women would dare to – but her traditional village background caught up with her. (8:08)**