

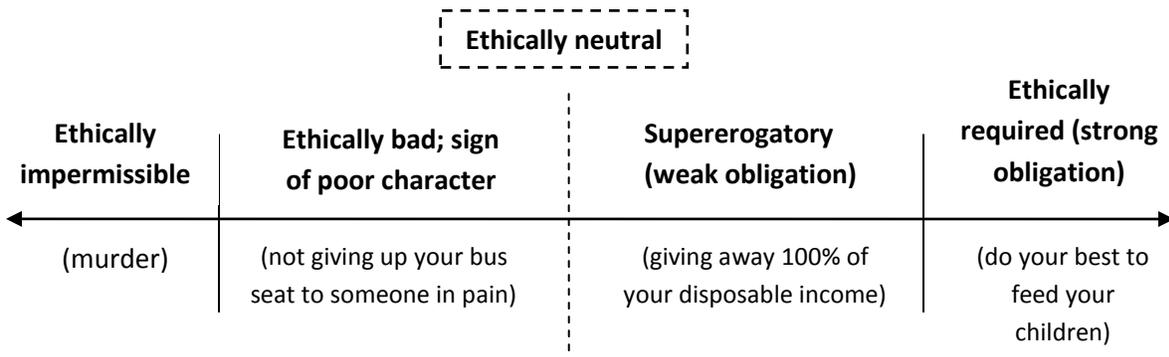
# Helpful Ethical Terms and Distinctions

- **Moral responsibility:** “When a person performs or fails to perform a morally significant action, we sometimes think that a particular kind of response is warranted.”<sup>1</sup>
  - Comes in degrees (more or less responsible)
  - Can range over many individual and collective actions, motivations, intentions, and decisions, attitudes, emotions, perhaps even perceptive dispositions.
  - Can be responsible for action, omission, complicity, ignorance, unintentionally doing something, being part of an unjust system
  - Responsibility can be *mitigated* by a number of factors, such as if the person had limited options, was highly coerced, or had minimal ability to do otherwise
  - Can be backward-looking (assign praise/blame) or forward-looking (make improvements for the future)
    - So a moral/political/institutional actor can be responsible *without being blameworthy or praiseworthy*
    - Similarly, someone could be blameworthy/praiseworthy for her virtues and vices *without* being responsible for them (because, say, a particular virtue/vice was the result of conditioning or genetic disposition)
- **Obligations and duties** (interchangeable for our purposes) can similarly come in many forms.
  - **Usually things that we *must* do, and not merely ought to do.**
  - Can be *strong* or *weak* (along a continuum) depending on what one knows (and should know), whether there are coercive pressures, one’s ability to do otherwise (based on financial, social, or political powers), or one’s role (and the attending expectations and duties)
  - Duties usually refer to ethical requirements (what we must do as moral agents)
    - ***Prima facie*** duties are ones that we have as a “default,” but they are *defeasible* (i.e., can be overridden by other considerations, obligations, interests)
      - We should satisfy these duties unless there are overriding reasons not to
    - Example: I have a *prima facie* duty not to lie, but this duty can be overridden when Nazis are asking whether Anne Frank is in my attic (because my duty to preserve her life outweighs the duty not to lie).

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<sup>1</sup> Eshleman, Andrew, "Moral Responsibility", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2009 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/moral-responsibility/>>.

- What is **ethically permissible** and **impermissible** can, in some cases, vary depending on the person, circumstances, or environment
  - For example: One could argue that prostitution is ethically impermissible *right now* based on *current* power structures; however, prostitution could be ethically permissible in a society that had proper safeguards and regulations to protect sex workers. (Alternatively, one could argue that prostitution is inherently exploitative, so it is necessarily ethically impermissible.)
  - There can be a range of ethically permissible actions, but one (or some) of these options might be ethically preferable based on (e.g.) long-term effects or what will aid future moral decision-making
- **Ethically legitimate excuses:** set of circumstances that justifies (to some extent) the failure to fulfill an obligation
  - Could mitigate blame or actually make the person blameless
- **Special obligations:** “owed to some subset of persons, in contrast to natural duties that are owed to all persons simply *qua* persons.”<sup>2</sup>
  - Special relationships: friendships, fellow citizens, family members, promisor-promisee, lender-lendee.
  - Includes **professional obligations**
  - Need to explain, for each of these, what *grounds* these obligations
- **Supererogation:** “the class of actions that go ‘beyond the call of duty’ [...] morally good although not (strictly) required”<sup>3</sup>
  - Generally what is supererogatory is ethically praiseworthy, but there are non-meritorious supererogatory actions. For example, if I only give my disposable income to charity because I fear bad publicity, my action should not be praised.



<sup>2</sup> Jeske, Diane, "Special Obligations", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/special-obligations/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Heyd, David, "Supererogation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/supererogation/>>.

- **Moral dilemmas:** “at the very least, involve conflicts between moral requirements”<sup>4</sup>
  - You are in a situation where you *must* do *x* or *y*, and both *x* and *y* are either a) morally required or b) morally prohibited. Since you cannot escape this situation (at least, not at the point the dilemma presents itself), you must either a) not satisfy a moral duty or b) bring about a moral evil or wrong
  - Can be *self-imposed* or *by the world*
    - Self-imposed: agent knowingly creates situation where moral requirements will necessarily conflict (e.g., conflicting promises)
    - By the world: not a result of agent’s wrongdoing (e.g., *Sophie’s Choice*)
  - **Moral residue/remainder:** Whenever there is a moral requirement that is left unfulfilled or a morally impermissible action done because one had to act in a dilemma
    - The agent should *recognize* the unmet or violated obligation and (perhaps) feel guilt and remorse as a result
    - The individual (or company, government, etc) should act so as to prevent being in that situation in the future
      - The agent also gains “new” obligations, like an obligation to warn about the imminent breach of the original obligation; an obligation to apologize for the breach; an obligation to compensate for the breach... etc.
    - “the mere fact that one had intentionally done *x* *should* haunt the rest of one’s life if *x* were very terrible, even granted that one was blameless”<sup>5</sup> → so there can be moral remainder, even for those who are blameless
    - For the *consequentialist*, there are no tragic moral dilemmas, since the cost-benefit analysis will not leave us with an unsatisfied moral duty or force us into an ethically impermissible action.
  - Beware of **false dilemmas!**
    - There might be other possibilities that would avoid the alleged dilemma.
- **Integrity**
  - Bernard Williams: define ‘integrity’ in terms of “commitments that people identify with most deeply, as constituting what they consider their life is fundamentally about [ground projects]”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> McConnell, Terrance, "Moral Dilemmas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/moral-dilemmas/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *Virtue Ethics*, pg. 77

- “for people to abandon an identifying-conferring commitment is for them to lose grip on what gives their life its identity, or individual character”
- Can rethink commitments and change how we weigh ethical concerns without necessarily sacrificing integrity
- Alternatively might think of integrity in terms of a motivating virtue
- Example: Some pharmacists are concerned about sacrificing their integrity if they do not believe in abortion and they believe Plan B is an abortifacient, but they are professionally required to provide Plan B.
- Another example: Physicians asked to go to extraordinary lengths to keep an anencephalic infant alive might believe that these demands violate their **professional integrity**.

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<sup>6</sup> Cox, Damian, La Caze, Marguerite and Levine, Michael, "Integrity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/integrity/>.