

Unit 2

Reason or Emotion?

Introduction

When we make ethical decisions, where do we start? What is the initial premise or understanding that leads us to choose one outcome or action over another? Do we have a rational principle ("Stealing is wrong, therefore I should not steal") or an intuition ("It is not right to steal from someone else, because I do not like it when someone steals from me") that underlies our approach to making an ethical choice? In other words, is there a way of distinguishing a process of ethical decision-making, something that is outside of the circumstances of the moment, something that allows us to learn from past experience or to develop a set of reasons for acting one way instead of another?

Immanuel Kant and David Hume approached this problem from two very different perspectives in the eighteenth century. In this unit, Waller's book lays out the basic elements of each approach and provides a sample of the writings of these two philosophers. Consider how you reason through making decisions. How much of a role does emotion play? Should it be an important part of making ethical decisions? Is emotion unavoidable, something that comes from being human?

Learning objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

1. identify basic principles of ethical theory;
2. outline the way in which reason or feeling/emotion provide a different approach to ethical decision-making; and
3. identify, compare and contrast the philosophical approaches to ethics found in the work of Immanuel Kant and David Hume.

Assigned reading

Waller, Bruce N. *Consider Ethics: Theory, Readings and Contemporary Issues*. 3rd ed. Toronto/Montreal: Pearson Longman, 2011.

Chapter 3, "Ethics, Emotions and Intuitions"

Chapter 4, "Ethics and Reason"

Learning activities

Completing the learning activities will help you prepare for the assignments and the final exam.

Find the exercises at the end of Waller's chapters with questions for reflection, and be able to answer them. If you have further questions, check out some of the additional readings and sources Waller lists.

Assignment

The online discussion group starts with this unit. Make sure you log in and answer the unit question found under the discussion link on the navigation bar, and respond to at least three of your classmates' postings over the three weeks that each discussion topic is open.

Discussion group postings are divided into two periods, each worth 10% of your final mark. Assignment #3 concludes with Unit 6 discussions (Term 1) and Assignment #5 concludes with Unit 11 discussions (Term 2).