

Answering Ethics Questions

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MEE Practice I

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Gödel's Proof

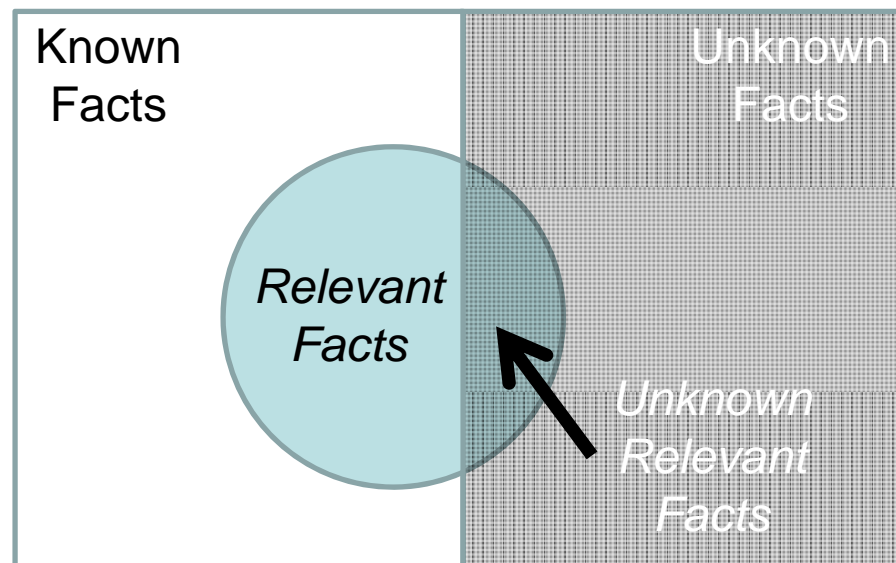
In 1931, the Czech-born mathematician Kurt Gödel demonstrated that within any branch of mathematics, there would always be some propositions that couldn't be proven using the rules and axioms of that mathematical branch itself.
(<http://www.miskatonic.org/godel.html> last accessed 10/24/2007)

In ethics, attempts to specify meanings of terms ahead of their application can never anticipate all of the cases to which they may apply.

Definitions of terms like “public welfare”, “conflict of interest” & “loyalty” are open-ended

Just The Facts?

1. Disagreements over relevant facts may masquerade as moral arguments
2. Relevant factual issues are sometimes difficult to resolve (e.g., chemical exposure - does gender matter?)
3. Even if facts are known, disagreement on their relevance may occur



Problem Framing: Line Drawing

1. Select a “negative paradigm case”, one that is uncontroversially unethical
2. Select a “positive paradigm case”, one that is definitely ethical
3. Determine how the “test case” compares to these two extremes.

Features of Bribery

Gift Size

Timing

Reason

Responsibility for Decision

Product Quality

Product Cost

Paradigm Instances of Features of Bribery

Large (>\$10,000)

Before recommendation






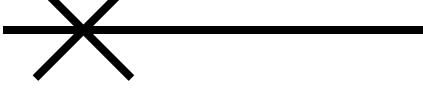
Personal Gain

Sole

Worst in Industry

Highest in Market

Problem Framing: Line Drawing

<i>Features</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Test</i>	<i>Positive</i>
Gift Size	Large		Small
Timing	Before		After Decision
Reason	Personal		Educational
Responsibility	Sole		None
Product Quality	Worst		Best
Product Cost	Highest		Lowest

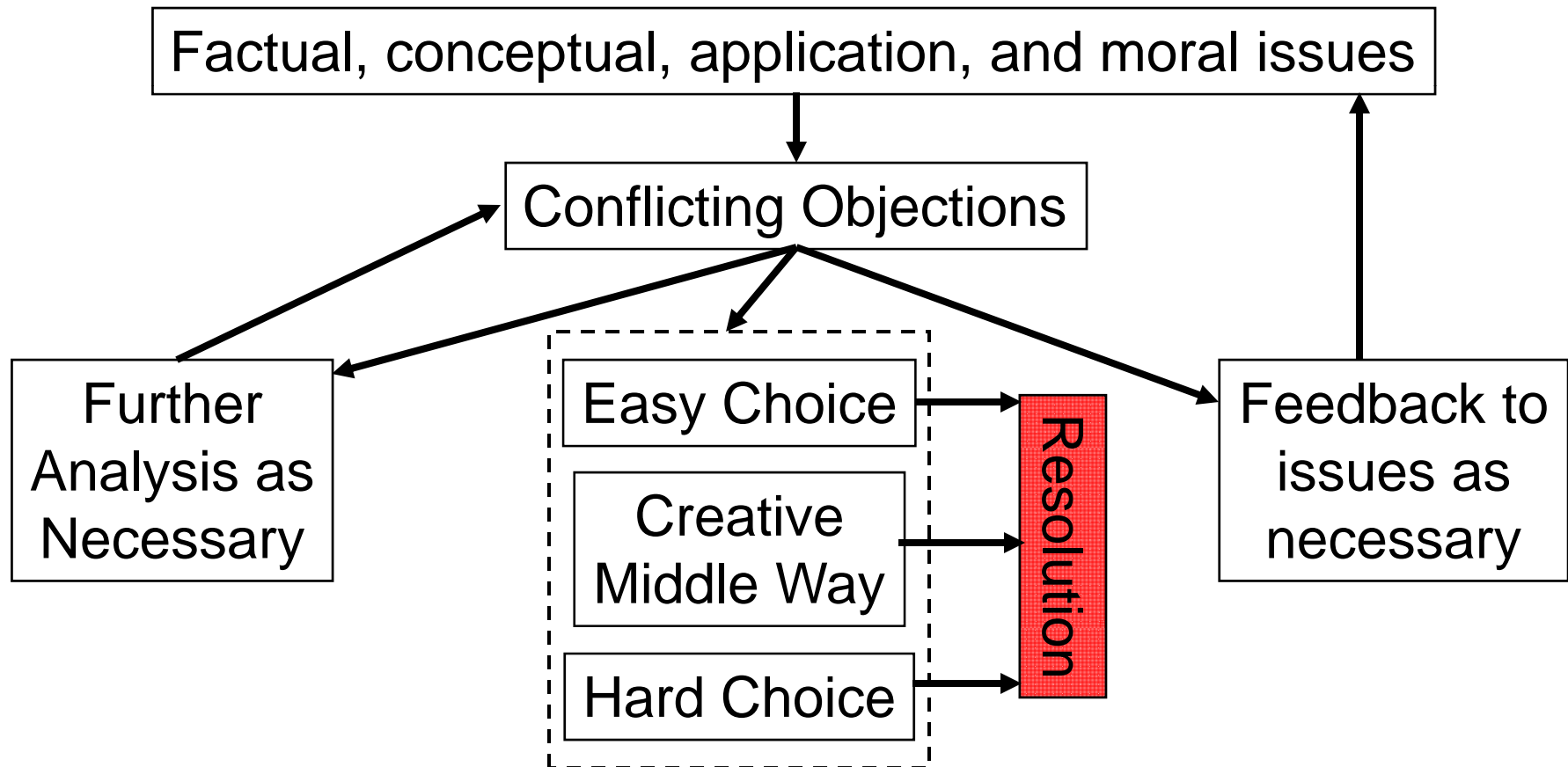
Some features are more important than others. The most important features can be denoted by circling the X marker.

Hallmark of Line Drawing is treating similar cases similarly, with a bases in precedent.

Conflicting Ethical Concerns

Case 57: "Trees"

Engineering Ethics: Concepts and Cases, 3rd Edition



Two Underlying Moral Concepts

Universalizability

Consistent thinking. Whatever is right (or wrong) in one situation is right (or wrong) in any relevantly similar situation.

Ex: Is it acceptable to falsify data, even under dire conditions?

Reversibility

Special application of Universalizability. Would a decision or action still be acceptable if the stakeholders changed places?

Ex: Experienced engineer telling apprentice to do something wasteful without explanation.

Utilitarian Mantra

Actions that bringing about the greatest total good are “right”

Preference Utilitarianism: equates “right” with “happiness”.

Promotes conditions allowing each individual to pursue happiness as s/he perceives it.

Tenants of “happiness” are *freedom* and *well-being*.

Three Obvious Problems With Utilitarian Mantra:

Unknown outcome leads to no action “Paralysis by analysis”

Challenging to determine scope of audience
(Those effected by a decision)

Justifies harming individuals for the greater good
Ex: It is better to kill one person to save two others

Three Utilitarian Approaches

Cost Benefit Approach

Attempts to translate negative and positive utilities into fiscal terms and then base decisions on maximizing monetary value. Involves much risk estimation to assign Dollar value to unknown utilities.

Act Utilitarian Approach

Attempts to identify course of action producing the most “good”? [“Good” must be defined] (Ex: If two approaches are otherwise identical, which will save more lives or serve more people?)

Rule Utilitarian Approach

Imposes artificial rules that attempt to maximize utility, provided everyone acts the same under the similar circumstances. (Ex: we obey stop signs and everyone gets to their destination)

Respect for Persons Mantra

Actions are “right” that accord equal respect to each moral agent

Moral Agents are sentient individuals capable of formulating and pursuing goals on their own (guns, cats, and laws, and not Moral Agents).

Maximizing the welfare of the majority must take second place to protecting the moral agency of individuals.

Two Obvious Problems With Respect for Persons Mantra:

Enabling one moral agent often means disabling another

Not always justifiable to enable one moral agent when overall utility suffers

3 Respect for Persons Approaches

Golden Rule

Treat every moral agent equally

Self-Defeating Criterion

If all moral agents took an action, would it undermine their ability as individuals to take that action? (Ex: Knowing a customer won't check quality, one agent can specify cheap parts. However, if all agents specified cheap parts, customer would learn to check, eliminating agents' ability to specify cheap parts.)

Rights

Society-imposed, agreed-upon protective barriers that prevent one moral agent from harming another. (Ex: Golden Rule and Blogging vs. expectation to privacy)

Example: “Late Confession”

Case 36: “Late Confession”

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Utilitarian Mantras

Cost Benefit Approach

Translates negative and positive utilities into fiscal terms, decides on max \$ value.

Act Utilitarian Approach

Identifies actions producing the most “good”? [“Good” must be defined]

Rule Utilitarian Approach

Imposes rules to maximize utility, provided everyone acts the same

Respect for Persons Matras

Golden Rule

Treat every moral agent equally

Self-Defeating Criterion

If all individuals did something, would it undermine ability of all to do it?

Rights

Society-imposed, agreed-upon protections

Homework Assignment

Real Life Equivalent to: "Late Confession"
Engineering Ethics: Concepts and Cases, 3rd Edition

Marilee Jones, former MIT Dean of Admissions was found to not have academic credentials appropriate to her job after more than two decades of service to MIT.

How should the Institute have handled this situation?

Select four of the six viewpoints outlined here (and in the book)