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Ethical theories: virtue, duty and happiness



Box 4.3 Activity: Paired discussion

In pairs imagine two Mother Teresas:

Mother Teresa number one longs to dance in scarlet silk, but believing it is right to help the poor she suppresses her desire.

Mother Teresa number two has never considered any life other than that of helping the poor.

Aristotle would argue that the first Mother Teresa is more virtuous because she does what she does because she believes it is the right thing rather than because she is naturally altruistic. Do you agree?

After 10 minutes of discussion participants should be asked for feedback.



Box 4.6 Activity: Small group work

Imagine we could save the life of five people by diverting a train from one track onto another on which one person is working. If we divert the train we kill one person, if we do not five people die.

Some deontologists would argue that we should not divert the train. This may lead to the death of the five, but no *action* of ours led to their death and we are not morally responsible for what we *don't* do. Such a deontologist is relying on the 'act–omission distinction'.¹¹

Other deontologists would argue that we should divert the train with the intention of saving the five. This makes the death of the one a foreseen *but unintended* outcome of our action. We are not morally responsible, this deontologist will say, for the unintended consequences of our actions. Such a deontologist is relying on the 'doctrine of double effect'.¹²

In small groups, participants should discuss whether the act–omission distinction and/or the doctrine of double effect can save the deontologist from having to insist that we do things we shouldn't do, or not do things we should do.

A spokesperson from each group should present the group's conclusions to the rest of the class.

The discussion of euthanasia and assisted killing in Chapter 13 applies these two distinctions to a particular problem. Participants might be asked to read that discussion before they do this activity. Alternatively *half* the groups might be asked to read that discussion before they do this activity.



Box 4.8 Activity: Thought experiment

Imagine that biotechnology produces a machine such that when people are attached to it they believe that they are happily living fulfilling and virtuous lives, when they are actually doing nothing but lying on a bed in a hangar-like building as these machines flood their bodies with chemicals.

The utilitarian government are considering whether or not to attach everyone to these machines.

Not everyone could be attached of course. Those on the machine must be fed, cleaned, protected. But even taking into account the unhappiness of the unattached, the greatest happiness would arguably still be produced by attaching the majority to the machines.

Should the government attach its citizens to these machines? Does conducting this thought experiment have ramifications for our acceptance of utilitarianism?¹⁷



Box 4.9 Activity: Presentations

Human therapeutic cloning involves producing a human clone in order to conduct research on it, or to harvest stem cells which may one day be used to repair human organs. Human cloning could provide huge benefits for those who are ill, their carers and their families.

For the purposes of this activity we are going to assume that human embryos have the right to life from the moment of syngamy (the point at which the sperm and the egg fuse).

Answer the following questions:

1. Would a **virtue ethicist** allow therapeutic human cloning? What reasons would he give for his view? What are the objections to his view?
2. Would a **deontologist** allow therapeutic human cloning? What reasons would he give for his view? What are the objections to his view?
3. Would a **consequentialist** allow therapeutic human cloning? What reasons would he give for his view? What are the objections to his view?

The class should be divided into three groups. Each group should take one question and prepare a presentation for the rest of the class.

We shall be discussing therapeutic cloning in Chapter 7. This activity is best completed before reading that discussion. It might be re-visited after reading that discussion.