

Fundamental Moral Unit

This video introduces the general ethics concept of fundamental moral unit. When making ethical decisions, the one consideration that a theory favors over all other considerations is called the fundamental moral unit. It is the primary basis for moral consideration. Societies or ideologies that are driven by individualism, rights, and liberty tend to identify the individual as the fundamental moral unit, while societies or ideologies that emphasize community, cooperation, and care for the most vulnerable tend to identify the relationship among people as the fundamental moral unit. The fundamental moral unit may also include the connections between human and other natural or spiritual entities in societies or ideologies with close ties to the environment or religion.

The ethics of a fundamental moral unit may be driven by the value system of a culture, yet one culture's values may differ from those of another. To learn more about different value systems watch *GVV Pillar 1: [Values](#)* from the [GVV video series](#).

To learn about related general ethics concepts, watch *All is Not Relative, Causing Harm, and Moral Agent & Subject of Moral Worth*.

The case studies on this page explore the relationship between policy and the fundamental moral unit. "Welfare Reform" questions whether the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 helped or hindered families in the United States by supporting the poor through direct aid. "Responding to Child Migration" examines the influx of children migrants to the U.S. in 2014 and the response from U.S. state and federal authorities. For a case study about the significance of the environment in making ethical decisions, read "Climate Change & the Paris Deal." For a case study about the importance of freedom of expression for both individuals and groups in the wake of racially motivated offenses at Yale and the University of Missouri, read "Freedom of Speech on Campus."

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: justice, moral absolutism, moral agent, moral pluralism, moral relativism, morals, self-serving bias, subject of moral worth, and values.

Discussion Questions

Western philosophy identifies the individual as the FMU; feminist theories tend to use relationship and maintaining the connections among people; Eastern and indigenous theories put natural or spiritual systems as the core to be maintained.

1. Give an example to show that you can use these different kinds of thinking to arrive at the same or similar answers for what is morally permitted.
2. Show how, in some instances, the answer to what is morally permitted would be different.



3. How can you use these different methods without just picking the theory that best yields the answer that reflects your personal opinion? Any solid normative judgment will have reasons that reflect the values of impartiality and universalization.
4. Western theories are said to emphasize rights and liberty over need and vulnerability. Explain how that connects to FMU.
5. Feminist theories are said to care for the most vulnerable. Show how that is consistent with a theory that uses relationships as its core concept.
6. Which of the three systems best recognizes non-human animals as having moral importance? Explain.

Additional Resources

For more information on concepts covered in this and other videos, as well as activities to help think through these concepts, see Deni Elliott's workbook *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, available for free download at the link below. This workbook explores what ethics is and what it means to be ethical, offering readers a variety of exercises to identify their own values and reason through ethical conflicts.

Transcript of Narration

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“There are so many considerations in making ethical decisions, but what consideration is most important? Different cultures and ethical systems have produced theories that favor one consideration over others. The consideration that a theory favors is called a Fundamental Moral Unit, or FMU.

Many of the classical Western philosophers from the Greek and Roman traditions favor the individual as the Fundamental Moral Unit. In these theories, the primary dictate is a negative statement: Don't get in an individual's way in his or her pursuit of the good life.

Feminist theories tend to determine the best choice based on how well those choices strengthen the connections among people and how well the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed. The fundamental moral unit here is relationship between people and is based on the belief that care should be given to those who can't take care of themselves.

Some Eastern theories promote the overall good of the community first and foremost. And some indigenous theories stress human's connection with the world as a whole, with all natural systems and species having an equal right to co-exist. People who grow up in these traditions expect that they and

others will sacrifice individual self-interest for the good of the group and the environment. The Fundamental Moral Unit here is called “aggregate good.”

Let’s consider a decision you might encounter if you were a member of your local city council. There is a 50 acre parcel of land in your city’s jurisdiction that was designated a hundred years ago to remain open space. Now the area contains some ancient Native burial grounds, but the tribe members a hundred years and tribe members today are happy with the designated use as long as the woodlands around the burial mounds stay intact. A developer would like to build a shopping mall there. As a city council member, you get to decide how that land will be used today: should it remain a park or become a shopping mall?

If you make your choice based only on the good that comes to individuals, you might be tempted to go with the shopping mall. The mall will provide jobs for many of the people in the community who are out of work and the additional income from the taxes from the new property owner and the businesses will allow the city to reduce taxes for individual home owners.

Which choice best advances the overall good of the community in which I live? The policy choice made previously to protect the land respected human connections to natural systems and was sensitive to the culture and history of a minority group. Affirming that decision helps all people in the community maintain trust in government.

We can see how the teachings from all of these traditions can help us in analyzing an important choice. And they can help us answer one more question: Can I find a choice that doesn’t cause harm to anyone or anything? If a shopping mall is a good idea for the community, alternative building sites that don’t cause harm are waiting to be found.”