1.1 The Three Organizing Questions of Ethics



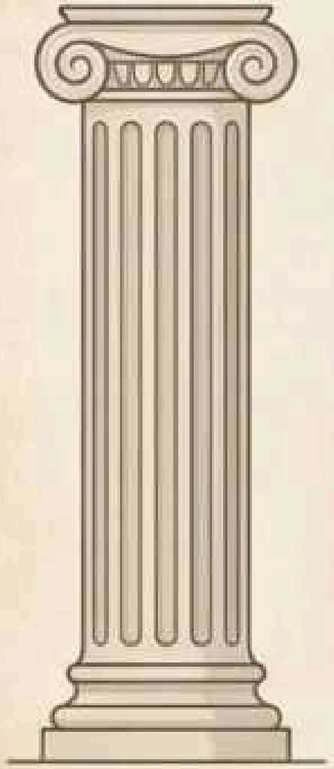
The terms defined here will serve as the foundation for every subsequent lecture.

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1.2

The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.

— Socrates (Plato's Apology)



Ethics is this examination applied to our choices.

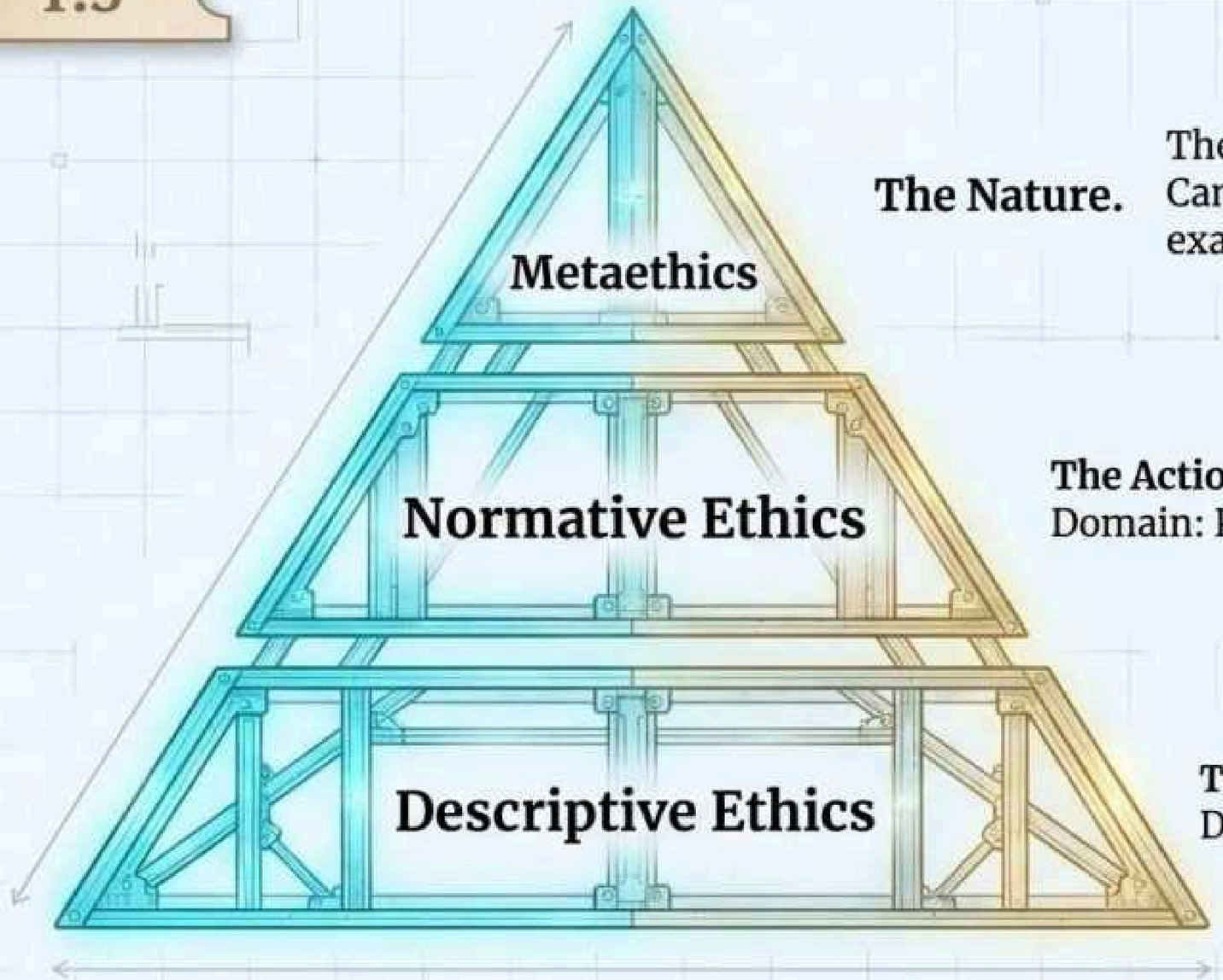
Actions: What makes choices right or wrong?

The Good Life: What makes lives genuinely good?

Character: What kind of person should we strive to be?

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1.3



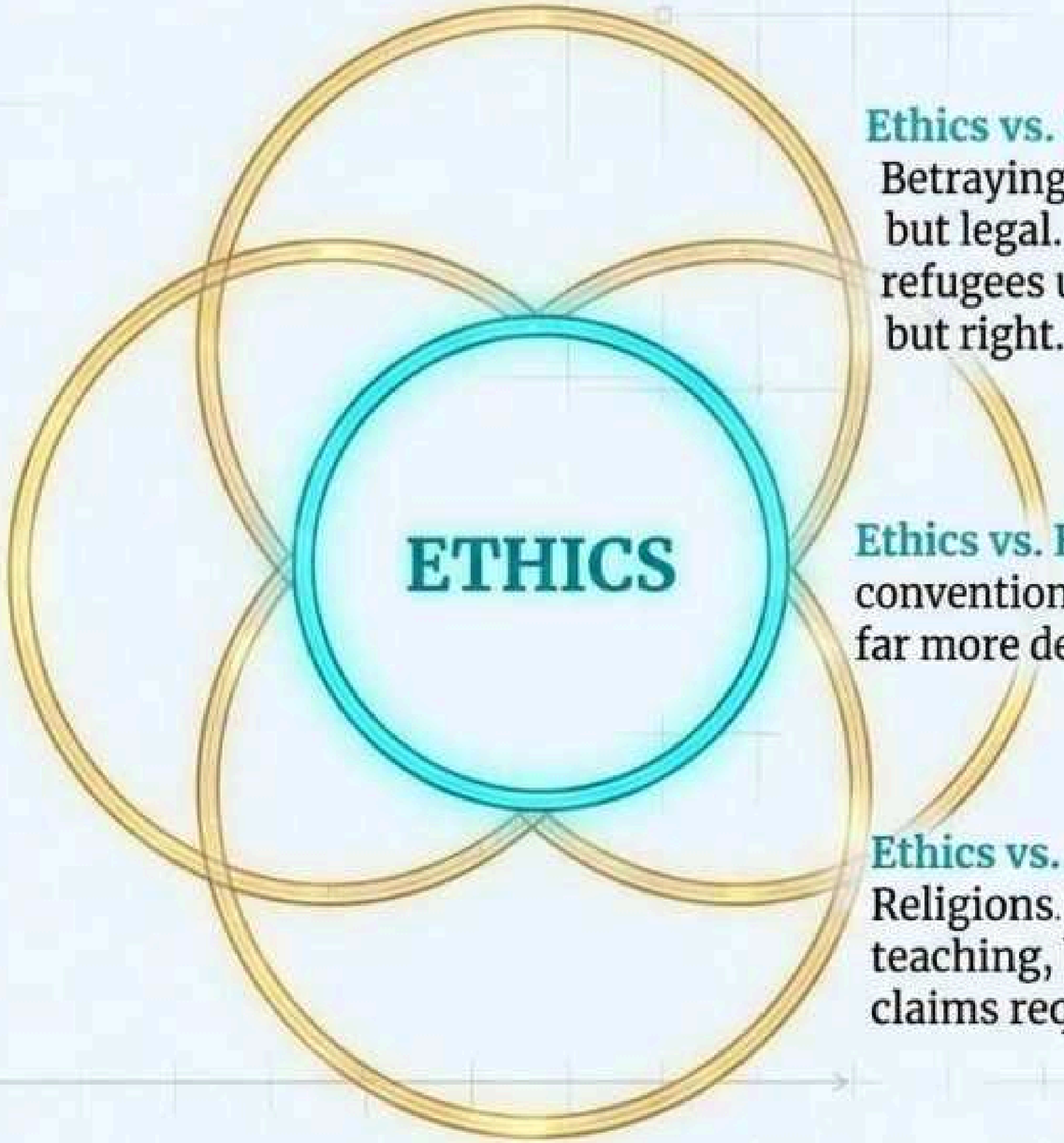
The Nature. The nature of morality itself. Can moral claims be true, and what exactly makes them so?

The Action. What we should believe and do. Domain: Philosophers building moral theories.

The Facts. What people in *fact* believe and do. Domain: Historians and Social Scientists.

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Ethics vs. Law:
Betraying a friend's trust is wrong but legal. or, but legal. Sheltering refugees under an unjust law is illegal but right.

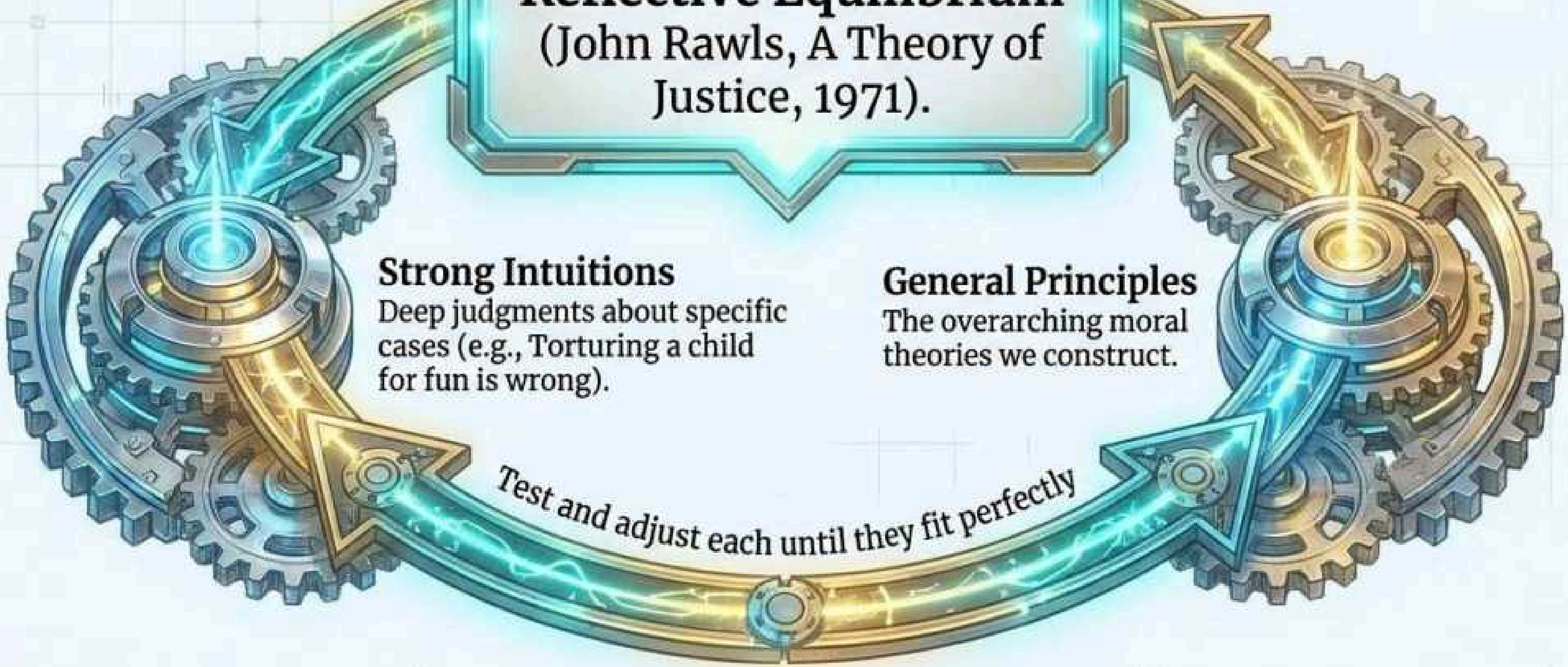
Ethics vs. Etiquette: Etiquette dictates convention; morality claims to matter far more deeply.

Ethics vs. Religion:
Religions. Religions provide moral teaching, but philosophy asks if moral claims require a religious foundation.

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1.5

Reflective Equilibrium (John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 1971).



Strong Intuitions
Deep judgments about specific cases (e.g., Torturing a child for fun is wrong).

General Principles
The overarching moral theories we construct.

Test and adjust each until they fit perfectly

No judgment is completely beyond revision, but we should not discard a strong intuition lightly.

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1.6

Cultural Relativism:

Right and wrong are relative only to a specific society's code. (Supported by Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture, 1934).

The Greeks

Custom: Burn their dead fathers.

Reaction to eating the dead: Horrified.

The Callatians

Custom: Eat their dead fathers.

Reaction to burning the dead: Horrified.

The historian Herodotus (via King Darius) quoting the poet Pindar: Custom is King.

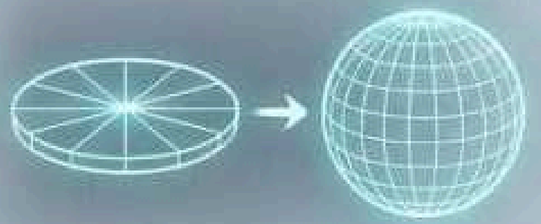
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Premise:
Societies fiercely disagree about morality.

Flawed Conclusion:
Therefore, there is no objective moral truth.

The Refutation
(Flat Earth Analogy)



People once disagreed about the shape of the earth—that did not show it has no shape.

The Real Cause: Disagreement often stems from different factual beliefs (like the existence of an afterlife) rather than different basic values. **Real disagreement** only proves that some party might be wrong.

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1.8

The Awkward Consequences of Relativism

(drawn from James Rachels' *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 1986)

Warning 1: Societal Infallibility.
If right just means approved by society, a society can never be mistaken about its own code.

Warning 2: Reformers are Villains.
Moral reformers (like the abolitionists) were **wrong** by definition because they opposed the accepted code of their time.

Warning 3: Impossible Critiques.
We lose the logical ability to condemn another society's horrific practices (e.g., slavery).

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The Relativist's Paradox – Tolerance

We should tolerate other cultures.

The Paradox:
This is itself an objective moral claim. A relativist cannot say this claim binds a society that actually values intolerance.

The Better Lesson – Humility

Anthropological humility asks us to pause and check:

1. Does a strange custom reflect a different value, or just a different fact?

2. What values do most societies actually share? (e.g., rules against murder within the group; care for children).

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1.10

Sentiment

IS
(Descriptive Facts)

The Is-Ought Gap

Facts alone do not entail what we should do.

OUGHT
(Moral Obligations)

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740) — Morality is just what each person feels; judgments rest entirely on sentiment, not logical derivation.

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1.11

GOOD



GOOD = PLEASANT

But is the pleasant actually good?

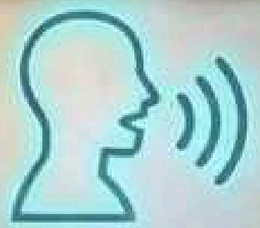
Because this question always remains open, Good cannot be defined in natural terms. It is a simple, unanalyzable property.

G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903).
Note: Critics say this proves too much, but it shaped 20th-century ethics.

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1.12

Input



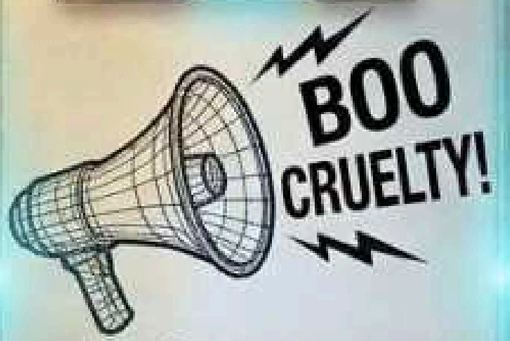
Cruelty is wrong.

The Emotivist Translation Engine

(Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936 & Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, 1944).

Notes that the statement is neither true nor false.

Output



Moral statements merely express attitudes and attempt to influence others.

The Critic's Rebuttal:
If this is true, how can moral argument ever be rational?

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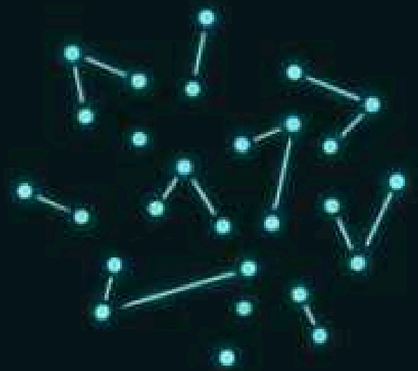
1.13 Error Theory (John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 1977).

Moral claims purport to describe objective facts, but no such facts exist.



The Argument from Queerness

If objective values existed, they would be incredibly strange entities unlike anything else in the universe, requiring a bizarre faculty just to perceive them.



The Variation in Codes

Endless disagreement points to morality being a human invention, not a discovery of reality.

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1.14



Moral Realism

Protecting against the charge of queerness

Pathway 1: Like Mathematics.

Moral facts aren't physical, but they are absolutely knowable by reason, just like math.

Pathway 2: Like Health.

Moral properties are natural properties that depend entirely on objective facts about living things.

Pathway 3: Embedded Reality.

Moral claims can be completely true without needing to describe some separate, mystical realm.

The debate is live, and this course does not require you to settle it.

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The Hub Question (Plato's Euthyphro):

Is the pious loved by the gods because it is or is it pious because the gods love it?

Fork A (Independent Standard)

If God loves it because it is right, then morality has a standard independent of God's will.

Fork B (Arbitrary Will)

If it is right because God loves it, morality is arbitrary. God could have loved cruelty, and cruelty would have suddenly become right.

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1.16

Reason:
Rational consistency demands it.

Sympathy:
Innate human connection.

The Ring of Gyges (Plato's Republic).

If you could be invisible and escape every penalty, why stay just?

Good Character:
Intrinsic requirement for a flourishing psychological life.

Fair Agreement:
The basis of a functional social contract.

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1.17

Family 1: Consequentialism	Family 2: Deontology	Family 3: Virtue Ethics
Focus: Outcomes and results.	Focus: Duties and rules.	Focus: Character and the agent.
Core Question: How do we decide what action produces the best state of affairs?	Core Question: What actions are inherently right or wrong, regardless of outcome?	Core Question: What traits make an agent genuinely good?

Each family is a unique response to a deeper question about what morality is fundamentally for.

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1.18

Step 1:
Think of a moral belief
you hold strongly.

Step 2:
When facing a disagreement, how do you defend it?
Do you appeal to Facts? To a Principle? To Feelings? To Authority?

Step 3:
What specific evidence could
actually change your mind?

That small habit of giving and examining reasons is the method of ethics, and it is the thread of the next five lectures.

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