

Introduction to Ethics – Introduction

HPPH4092

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Introduction to Ethics – Introduction

In this initial section, I want us to begin by revising some knowledge you may already have from previous studies in religion, philosophy, or ethics.

In order to discuss the forms that ethics takes, we must have a relatively strong grasp of the terminology and language used to describe various aspects of moral and ethical reasoning. This includes the distinction between morality and ethics, but also descriptors like consistency, relativism, virtue, and integrity.

These are phrases and terms that, in being used throughout this module, require precision in their use and a clear understanding of their meaningful differences.



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What are Ethics & Morality?



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Ethics and Morality

It is important before we begin this module properly to have a firm understanding of the language that is commonly used in this context – particularly the distinctions between ethics and morality.

Ethics refers to standards of conduct, standards that indicate how one should behave based on moral duties and virtues, which themselves are derived from principles of right and wrong.



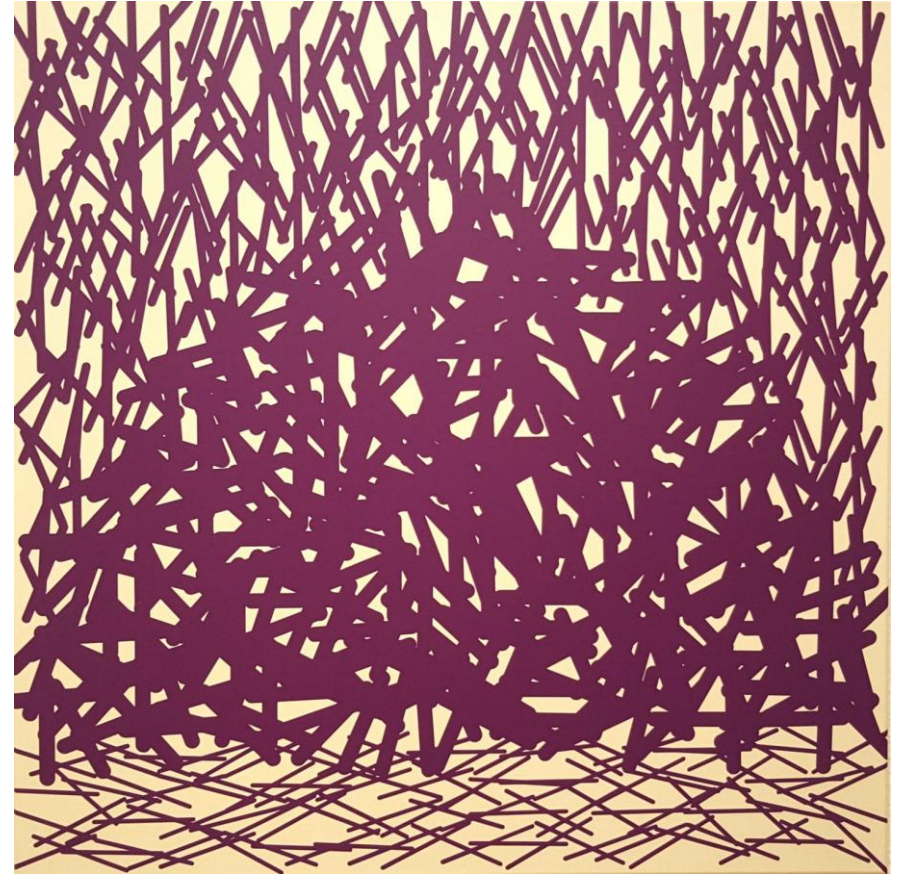
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Ethics and Morality

Morality is the general appreciation – that preserving life is a good thing, for example – while ethics are the way in which these commitments are operationalised or implemented – that healthcare should be provided in order to preserve life, for example.

Our moral principles are derived from our perception of what is good – a perception that can be formed from a variety of different sources.



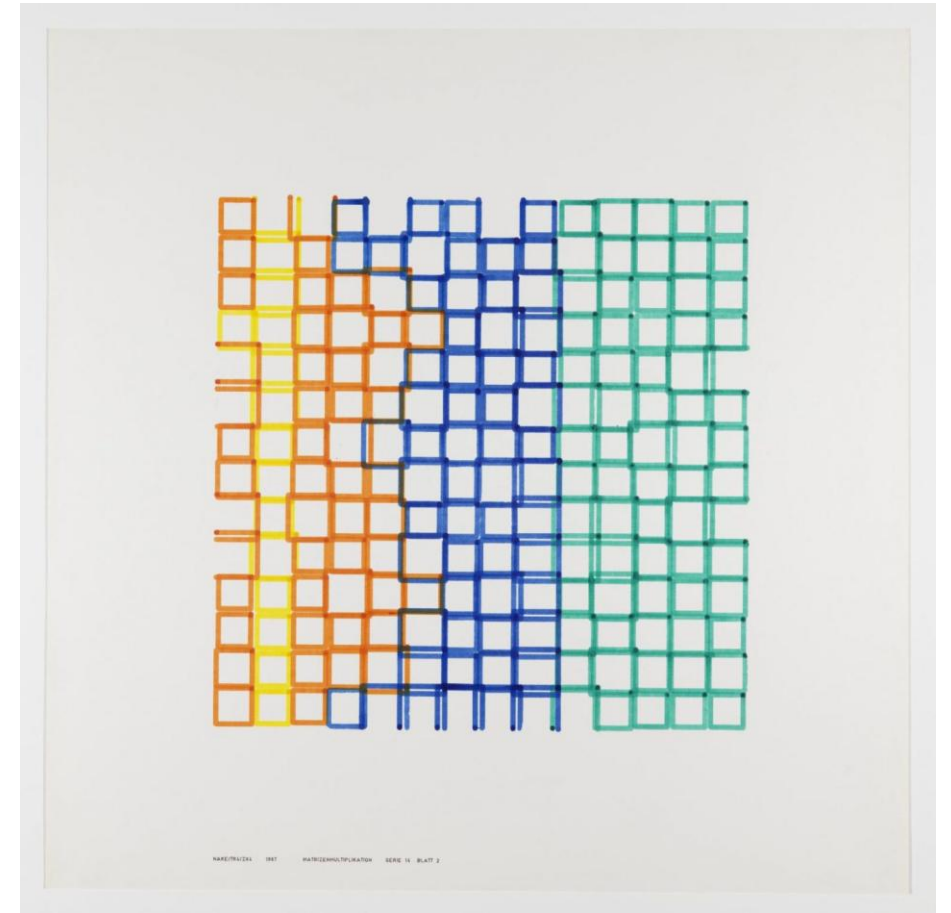
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Ethics and Morality

This process of valuation – that something is good, or bad, or that something more valuable than something else – is one of the key aspects of the operation of morality and ethics.

We engage in this process of valuation continuously in our lives and in our societies – we choose to value certain things over others – and this valuation has an impact on the way we think through the appropriateness of certain action in certain circumstances.



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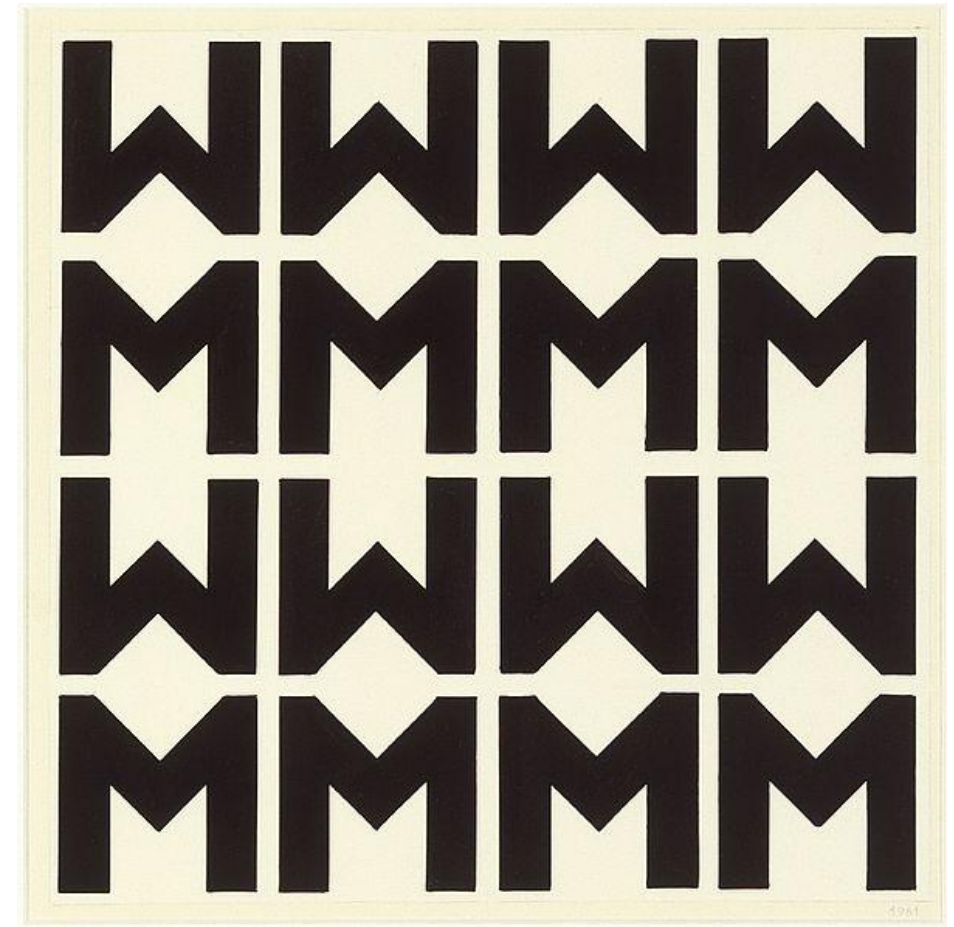
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Ethics and Morality

Where these valuations come from, and how gets to uphold a certain valuation in a particular society, is a complicated and often contested discussion.

Even just within the scope of Christian ethics, we may see our valuation of things as arising from scripture, the Christian tradition, the application of our own reason, or the leadership of religious authority.

No particular source or form of valuation is necessarily bad, nor are our valuations necessarily universal – we each choose to value things in a different way to others in society.



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Moral Relativity

Arising from this perception that our moral and ethical valuation differs according to our contexts and our tastes – e.g. I may value good food over monetary savings, while others may disagree and would rather save – is a realisation that our moral valuation of things is not philosophically necessary or culturally universal.

This realisation has produced an awareness of the relative nature of much of ethical reasoning, which has itself produced an argument for moral relativism.



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Moral Relativism

This is a position that believes that our values (e.g. preserving life is good) are purely determined your context or the society in which we grow up, and that there are no culturally universal values.

Moral values, in the opinion of moral relativism, are simply customs or conventions that vary from culture to culture – they are relative to our circumstances.

This draws on the existence of moral relativity to argue for moral relativism – that the existence of relativity should nature lead to its preservation.



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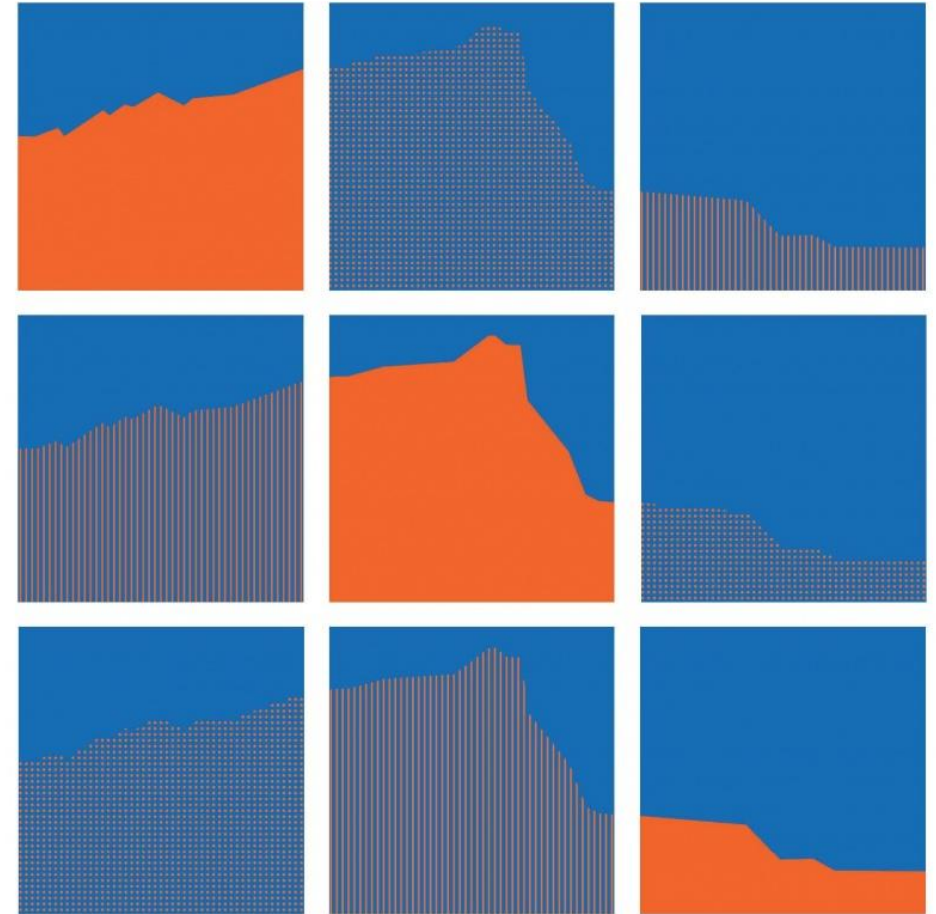
Moral Consistency

Another important feature of much discussion in ethics is the notion of ‘moral consistency’.

This is the idea that moral principles, such as a valuation of human life, should apply consistently across different circumstances.

This can be thought through as follows – if something is morally good or valuable in one context, it should also be recognised as morally good or valuable in other contexts.

Of course, this in itself, is a moral valuation – a valuation of consistent and predictable behaviour in the context of morality, over capricious or unpredictable moral behaviour.



Moral (In)Consistency

We often engage in forms of moral consistency and moral inconsistency on a daily basis – while we may value moral consistency, it is much harder in practice than in theory!

In order to illuminate this, think through some of the following examples

An anti-abortionist who supports the death penalty.

A vegetarian who buys leather shoes.

An environmental activist who drives an SUV.

Someone who thinks stealing is wrong but makes illegal copies of computer software or music.

To what extent do you think the following individuals are morally inconsistent?

How might these actions actually be consistent?



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Moral (In)Consistency

In each case, while there may be moral inconsistency in the seemingly opposed positions, this only occurs if the moral valuation expressed is absolute – that the anti-abortionist believes in the **absolute** valuation of human life, rather than the contextual value of human life.

The context of ‘valuing human life’ differs between the circumstances of abortion and capital punishment, and therefore the differing positions could be expressed with consistency – for example, the position that while ending human life in the context of abortion is wrong, capital punishment is justified on some other ground (for example, the protection from further loss of human life).



Moral (In)Consistency

As this has hopefully helped to demonstrate, our moral valuations are rarely absolute (though we often like to think or pretend so).

Instead, our moral valuations are complex, contextual, and change according to circumstances.

Understanding our moral and ethical reasoning is HARD – as is attempting to reduce it to a simple or effortless set of rules



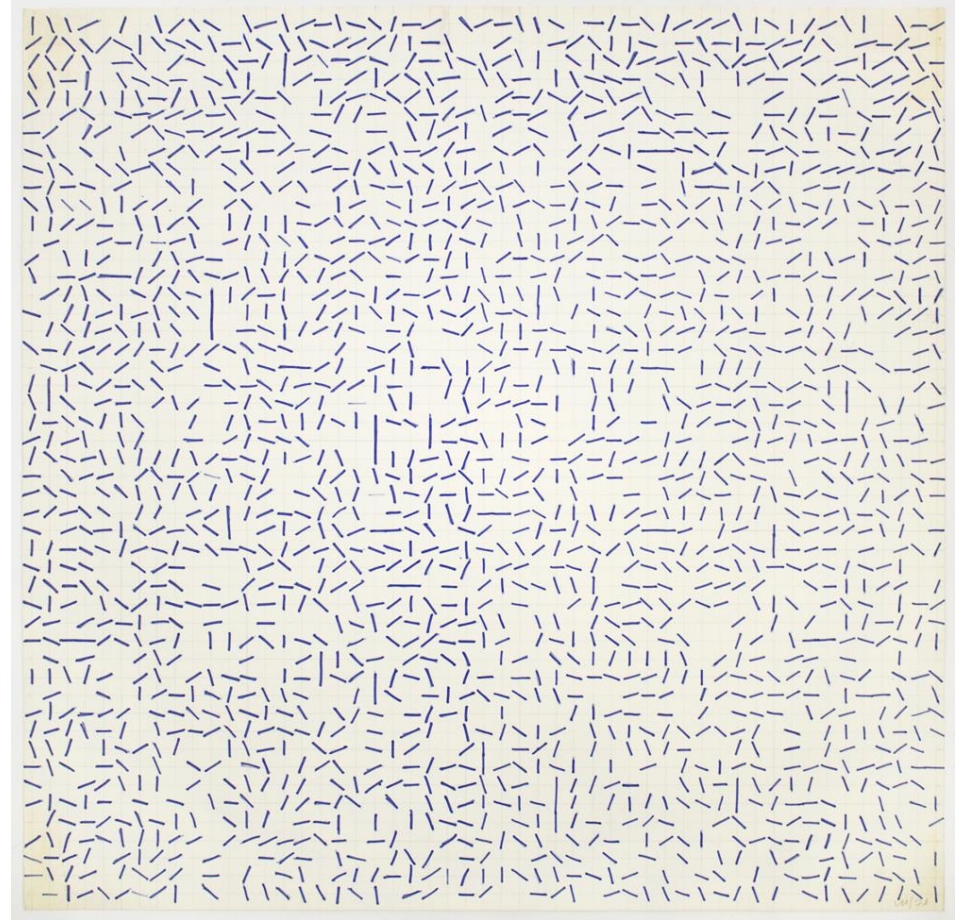
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Self-Interest

One attempt to try and figure out the foundation of our moral reasoning is a theory known as the 'self-interest theory'. This states that we are motivated moralistically purely by our own self-interest – there are no explanations for our principles beyond this and each form of our moral reasoning can be traced back to this principle.

As an example, it may be phrased as: Human beings are always and everywhere selfish. Even if there are objective moral values - we are incapable of living up to them - even when we appear to be doing so, we are actually acting selfishly.



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Self-Interest

This raises a further interesting wrinkle in our consideration of these foundational ethical and moral questions.

Does it matter why we do things, if we end up doing good things anyway?

This is the question of intent – why do we do the things we do – which is a question of central importance to the Christian tradition and its consideration of morality.



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Self-Interest

In our current societies, we have a tendency to answer this question with a resounding 'yes' – it does matter why we do things, and doing things for the wrong reasons can be morally bad, even if the act itself is good.

For example, we may believe euthanasia to be a morally good act, but we may be suspicious if the actor stands to inherit a great deal of money...

Yet, this itself is a moral valuation – valuing pure motives over impure ones – which bring us back to the same issues of whether and why these moral valuations arise from.



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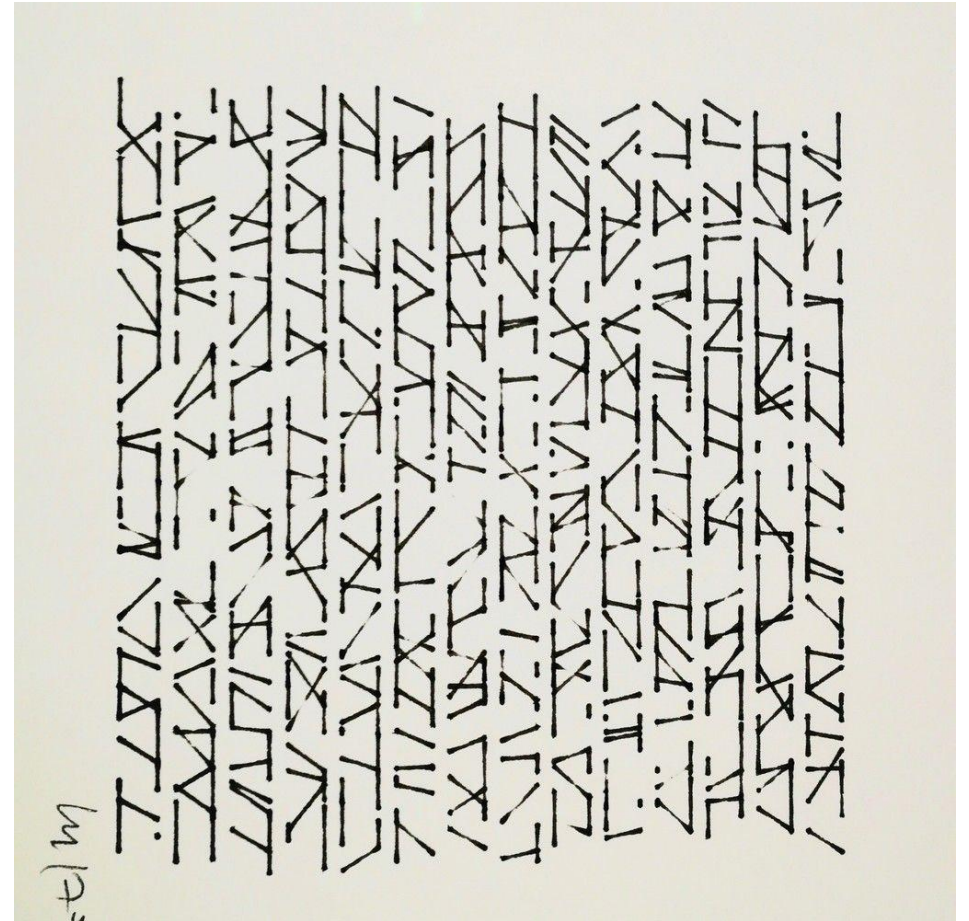
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Theories of Ethics

These difficulties of reasoning are not the only ways in which the theories of morality are structured into ethics – we see a great variety of attempts to systematise and organise our moral responses to everyday personal and social situations.

Ethical theories, such as religious ethics or deontological ethics, attempt to provide roadmaps for identifying the correct moral commitments and applying them in specific ethical contexts.

These theories attempt to fill-in and bridge the gap between our moral intuitions and our everyday actions.



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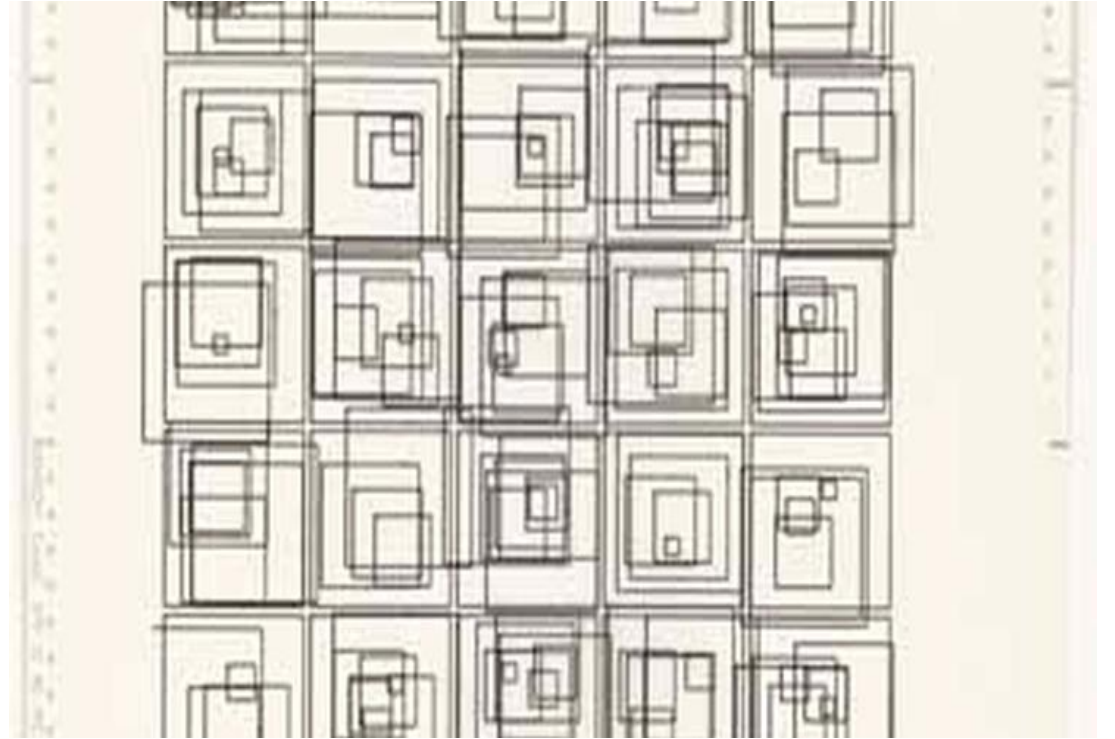
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Theories of Ethics

Some examples of ethical theories may be:

Religious ethics, which use the sources and narratives of a religious tradition to justify or build our moral commitments. In the Christian case, these sources may be scripture or the teachings of the Christian tradition.

Differently, deontological ethics, choose to uphold the valuation of the notion of duty in our ethical actions – that we should do our duty in circumstances, even where this may conflict with our moral sense.



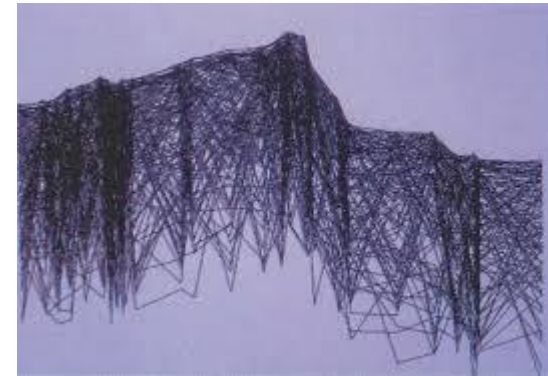
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Theories of Ethics

There are many other philosophical and religious approaches to this attempt to systematise our moral valuations – such as Utilitarian ethics focused on encouraging behaviour that benefits the most number of people, Consequentialist ethics, which focuses and values the consequences of an act over the mechanism by which it is performed, or the ethical systems of other religious traditions, such as the *dharma* of Hinduism or the *shari'ah* of Islam.

Generally, our ethical sensibilities are made up of a combination and pastiche of these theories of ethics – ethics is not just rule following, but is much more alive and flexible than that!



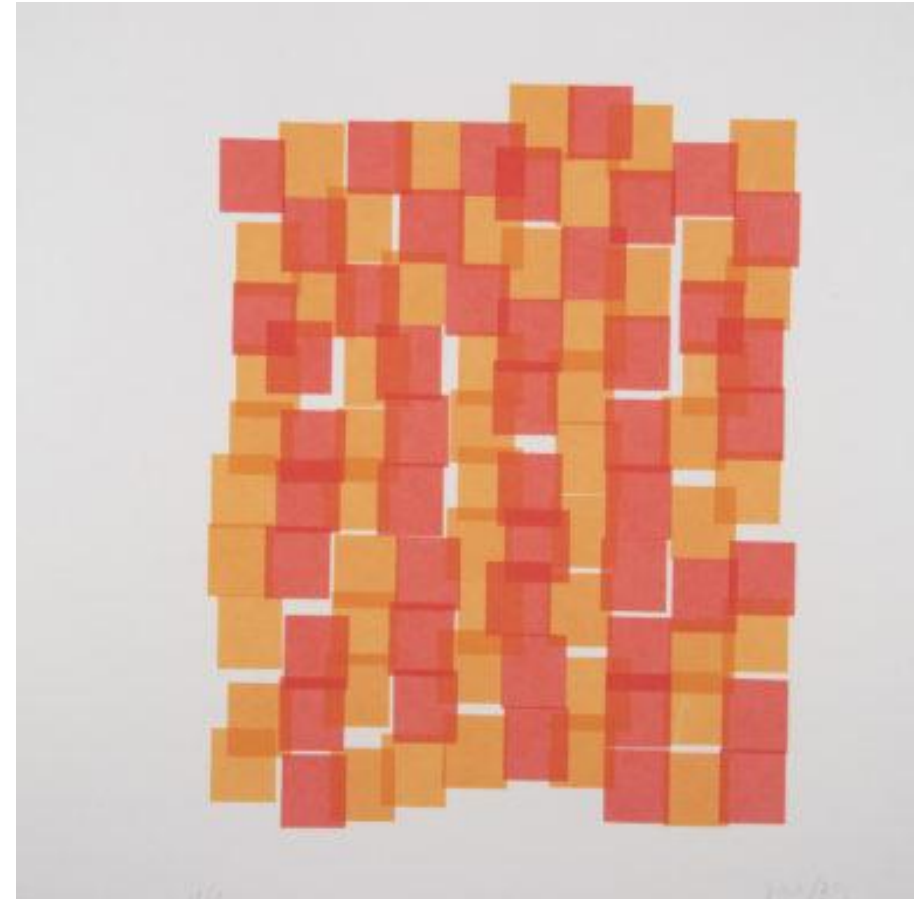
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Virtue

These moral goods we have been discussing do not only exist as discrete actions, but are also the foundation of temperaments, or virtues that guide our broader ethical behaviour. When we engage in a moral act, the act has ramifications beyond the completion of its performance – often our moral choices are long-term and ongoing through our interactions with others.

This notion – that singular moral acts contribute to a broader theme of morality – is a recurring point of discussion in moral reasoning.



Virtue

By acting in a consistently good way, much moral reasoning has supposed that we 'learn' how to be better at making morally good choices.

We practice our morality with each choice we make, and in doing, we gradually develop a guiding moral sense of how to act in new situations.

This sense is known as virtue – a trait or quality that is associated with development and practice of a moral good. For example, bravery or temperance, which emerge from morally good choices in specific situations reflect the purpose and grounding of a general moral good.

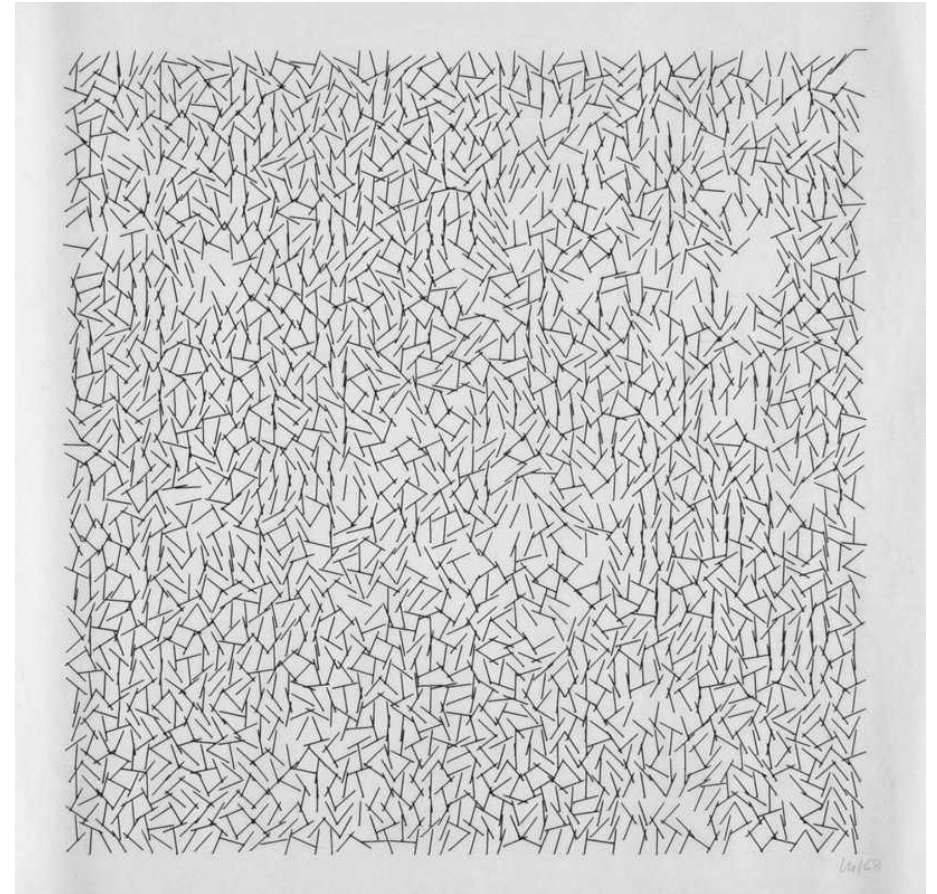


Platonic Virtue

For Plato, there are four cardinal virtues, that subsume all others:

Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance, and Justice

These virtues guide the way in which we bridge from the foundational moral commitments we have, to the practical ethical application of those commitments – guiding our actions to be just, temperate, fortitudinous, and prudent.



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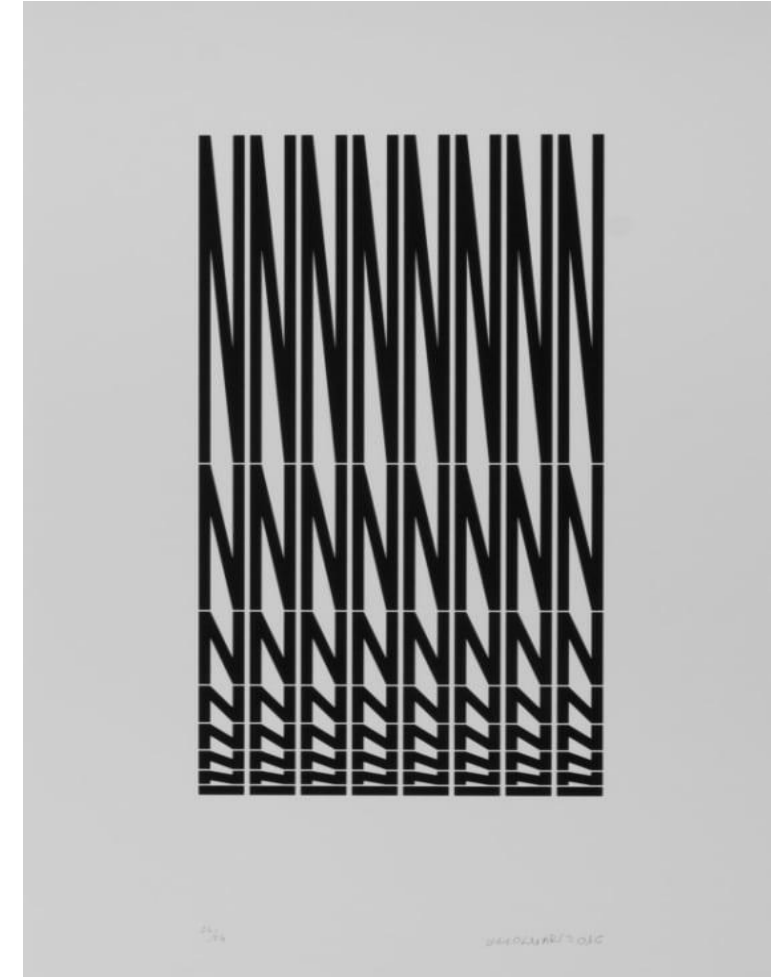
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Aristotelian Virtue

For Aristotle, virtue was the golden point between a lack of a trait and an excess of a trait.

An example might be the virtue of courage – for Aristotle, this virtue rested between the extremes of cowardice (a lack of courage) and foolhardiness (an excess of courage).

It is only through the practice of living ethically that one is able to assess and develop the necessary virtuous point for each situation.



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Reading

Throughout this module, we will be dealing with the specifics of Christian and Islamic ethics, but these traditions emerge from and interact with a much broader system of ethical reflection.

Details and reading on this broader system can be found in:

Irwin, Terence. (2020). *Ethics Through History*. Oxford University Press.

For this section, pick one of the chapters on Plato, Socrates, or Aristotle



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