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MA dissertation (Philosophy) August 2025

Towards a fire safety ethics

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

Fire safety practitioners (fire engineers, fire risk assessors, fire service enforcement officers and building owners and managers) routinely come across ethical dilemmas in their work, but there is no specific fire safety ethics as a published subject. This dissertation makes a start in this area, showing why an ethics is needed specifically for fire safety and considers some existing ethics, concluding with a preference for a person-centred discursive ethics. Real cases are discussed to anchor the discussion, and discursive ethics is found to be of some use but the writer finds it is stretched beyond its limits at times where it collapses into an authoritarian ethic.

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Introduction

In this dissertation I will approach a new subject area in ethics. Despite increased attention to fire safety following the horror of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, there is no “Fire safety ethics” for the profession. Bioethics has long been there to support decision making for medical professionals, but I found no philosophical literature to explicitly support my approach to ethical dilemmas as a fire safety professional. *Ethical* quandaries in fire safety did not form a part of my professional education and training. I will give examples to illustrate some difficulties and the need for this support.

Since 2017 there have been increasing calls for a person-centred approach to fire safety (including High Court case against UK Government), against resistance from government and some professionals in the fire safety sector.

In line with these calls, I will be arguing for a person-centred ethic. My perspective begins with real, embodied people not disconnected either from themselves, each other, or the built environment. My persons are not unencumbered and don’t need to be, aren’t mushrooms, and aren’t stripped of all recognisable qualities behind a veil of ignorance. Discursive ethics will be tested against this idea with examples.

Arguments against a person-centred approach in fire safety are aligned with majoritarian views and a medical model of disability. I will show that the medical model does not stand up in fire safety ethics because the built environment cannot be ignored; and that a majoritarian argument falls because protection of vulnerable people is the summum bonum of fire safety and the reason for its existence.

I want to discuss some philosophy that underpins my proposed approach. David Cockburn takes as the proto moral standpoint the concern a mother has for her only child. I interpret this as person centred in the sense that the child is the centre, not the mother. Put differently, the mother is not in the way of the concern, which is centred with the other person.

The Golden Rule of ethics, as suggested by Grenfell Inquiry barrister Danny Friedman KC, exemplifies a difficulty in ethics where it begins with oneself rather than other people. The order of words in the sentence “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” suggests the others are the primary concern, but the first consideration in this thought process is thinking about oneself, how oneself would feel in their position.

I agree with Mark Chubb from CUNY that ‘utilitarian’ design for means of escape (using the assumption of an average person’s time of reaction and movement to safety) is to be rejected, but his preference for Rawls introduces epistemic incoherence where real people are lost from sight, and their voices not heard, replaced by Rawls’ moral point of view that seeks independence from real lives.

Person centred after Grenfell

The notion of person-centred (widely interpreted) has been controversial in the fire sector in recent years. Fire safety law and practice begins with protection of lives, but the fire sector has not given sufficient consideration to vulnerable people and even after the horrific Grenfell Tower Fire, change in this direction continued to be resisted.

New Regulations will come into force in April 2026, requiring a person-centred assessment for people with evacuation impairments (although only on some buildings and it has to be paid for by the individual disabled resident). Government believes if an evacuation strategy does not benefit other residents, then they should not be required to share the cost. The requirement for personal plans is a change from the UK Government's previous stance that a personal evacuation plan is not "proportionate practical or safe". I will discuss these principles and their place in fire safety ethics.

70 people died on the night of the Grenfell Tower fire. Two more people died later of their injuries.

The fire has been described as the "most serious crime committed on British soil this century"¹ As I write, nobody has gone to jail in the years to date.

Finger pointing started immediately after the fire. Fire safety barrister David Stotesbury believed the response to the fire nearly brought down the UK government.

A judge-led inquiry, costing over £150 million ran for over four years "to examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire".²

The inquiry had begun with harrowing accounts from survivors. It then went through the firefighters that fought the fire. Then it detailed the local government handling before and after the fire, the professionals involved in renovating and cladding the tower and the UK government's leadership on specialist guidance.

In his summing up, Barrister Danny Friedman KC produced an outstanding analysis of the causes of the 72 deaths and a succinct and damning dissection of the wider state of the UK fire sector. The government were blamed for many things, the fire service's policy on Stay Put was blamed, the contractors who refurbished the tower were blamed, the local council (The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea) were blamed.

Friedman represented the majority of survivors and victims. In his summing up he wanted to go further than the list of individual deeds and actors.

He wanted to make sense of the context and find a fundamental underlying cause. He focused on the Golden Rule of ethics, saying fire professionals and others did not or could not conceive of being in the position of a person living in social housing.

"What happened at Grenfell Tower demonstrates an essential problem with the way the Golden Rule of faith and ethics is applied: that we don't necessarily do

unto others as we'd have them do unto us when we do not or cannot conceive of being in their position.

We do not imagine that their home could be our home.

We do not appreciate the power balances that they endure.

We do not live by the premise that in all of life's profit and loss, we are all ultimately neighbours.

The evidence painstakingly assembled by this inquiry tells us that we must".³

I support the use of imagination in fire safety practice, but the moral rule of Do Unto Others (and Love Thy Neighbour), through not being person-centred has questionable usefulness and ethical coherence, ultimately because the dictum begins with oneself rather than the other person. Epistemic limitations are introduced when we place ourselves in the way of our understanding of other people.

Seyla Benhabib argues convincingly that a moral view independent of our lives is unnecessary, unhelpful and misleading, and she shows where philosophy is mistaken in attempting to remove the ethical standpoint from the person. She too aligns herself with the maxim "do unto others"⁴ but I believe this does not fit her system and detracts from the practical clarity otherwise seen in discursive ethics. My reading of Benhabib's discursive ethics is exemplified by a discussion where participants genuinely want to hear their interlocuter's point of view, and in this action they do not get in the way, they do not put themselves in the other person's position, as that position is already taken – by that person.

Concrete examples of fire safety practice will be included, showing that a disconnection between real people on the one side and unrealistic design and management assumptions on the other causes problems.

I believe that Friedman's notion that we "cannot conceive of being in their position" is mistaken, and that our subject is possibly muddled by dualist intrusion in our world views. The dualism is not the full picture though, as even once this is cleared the idea that a moral view is exemplified by placing oneself in another's shoes remains in the moral systems I develop a preference for here.

I will apply David Cockburn's analysis of philosophical conceptions of a person, with my understanding of his thrust, where our self is encouraged to get out of the way of our understanding of other people. We will see that the notion "cannot conceive of being in their position" does not need to arise, that firstly it is enough (philosophically and practically) that we consider *them* in their position and secondly that the conceptual

need to enter into someone else's mind is driven by mistaken dualist remnants in our views. These remnants add distance between people where it does not exist.

Ideas of autonomy will be discussed with examples of a tension that arises in fire safety practice, leading to a potential for the discursive method to collapse to expertise, authority and enforcement.

I will conclude however that (adjusted) discursive ethics appears suitable as a basis in assisting fire safety decision making, with a real example to demonstrate where this may be working today. I will caveat this with areas for discussion in future work, as the underlying collapse to authority is a constant possibility, either through disbarring fundamentalists and bigots or through failure in the discursive process to achieve the right ends.

Designing without considering people

Fire safety is an intrinsically ethical discipline. Decisions in fire safety engineering, fire safety risk assessment, fire safety inspection and fire safety enforcement revolve around protection of people's lives. It took the aftermath of the catastrophic fire at Grenfell Tower to make this clear to a lot of the UK, a country that often slotted fire safety practice into the unwanted "red tape" category that had been demonised by the Conservative government.

An example of the centring of fire safety problems around people I can use here is the Welsh University that called in the fire service for advice. I was a fire service inspection and enforcement officer at the time, and my meeting on site with the university health and safety manager was just another day, just another routine inspection that resulted as it so often does in a quandary caused by the clash between unrealistic design assumptions on one side and funding shortfalls on the other.

The University had expanded its business studies department and had attracted increased numbers of undergraduates, into a building that had not been built with this purpose in mind.

The top floor of this multi-story building was at the time being used for students, a few of whom were dependent on mobility scooters and powered wheelchairs. These students accessed the floor by using the lift. In the event of a fire alarm, lifts automatically descend to the ground floor and can no longer be called from the upper floors.

There was no sprinkler system to delay fire development, no provision for verbal communication between the floors, no sanctuary where more than one person has protection from fire and smoke for a period while they await rescue from firefighters. There were also the usual problems I often encountered of doors and walls being moved

in a refit without sufficient attention being given to fire or smoke spread or occupants' escape.

To summarise this in one sentence: For wheelchair users there was a way in to the upper floors of the building, but if there was a fire alarm actuation there was not a way out.

In addition to wheelchair users, someone with any of a wide range of mobility problems would be trapped in the event of a fire. Despite this, because it was an otherwise unremarkable building, nobody would assume that they weren't safe in the event of fire, and neither had they been told. Families of those students using the building likewise had no idea that the building would be unsafe in a fire.

There were a few possible solutions (to this, a problem that shouldn't really have happened in the first place), all involving either substantial financial cost or a potential breach of the Equality Act. There could be further structural building work, employment of several new people to support each person with evacuation needs, additional equipment, or exclusion of anybody that couldn't make their way to safety down the stairs.

This and all fire safety quandaries I have been involved in have a moral dimension that cannot be separated from the technical response. Consideration of the people who could be potentially affected cannot be separated from the decision or the process, because they are the reason that the fire safety practice occurs.

The quandary arose because people had not been properly considered in the design and management of the building until it was too late. The quandary consists in competing needs: people, law, finance, ethics.

I will show later on page 15 in "Further underlying problems and design assumptions" that ignoring people goes right back to initial design on most buildings, with little regard paid to the people who need most protection.

Why does fire safety practice need support from philosophical ethics?

I will divide the need for a fire safety ethics into two broad reasons: Unethical behaviour in the fire sector; and ethical quandaries arising from the specific set of circumstances of fire safety today. The two reasons here are intertwined on the buildings I will describe.

The first and clearest reason is the unethical behaviour in the fire sector. In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, the UK Government quickly commissioned Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out a review of building regulations and fire safety. Hackitt had begun her career as an engineer and had spent a decade as chair of the Health and

Safety Executive but despite this experience she said “I was shocked by the some of the practices I have heard about”⁵. Hackitt concluded that “cultural and behavioural change” was needed. In her writing, and in her frequent presentations to the sector she returned to the same theme – “Everyone’s focus must be on doing the right things”^{5a}.

Concurrently and subsequently a judge -led inquiry spent seven years widely analysing behaviours and causes of the tragedy. In volume 2 of the Grenfell Inquiry Report, it was made clear that so much that was done was intentional – described as “systematic dishonesty”. Specialist journalist Peter Apps describes this part of the report as “the most shocking section”⁶. He also says it “can easily be portrayed as the dark heart of the whole scandal”⁷.

I will add information from my own professional experience to this to draw out an understanding of how the horrors of Grenfell were not the result of isolated behaviours or unique circumstances. The fire itself was relatively unusual, but the behaviours that led to it were fairly standard in my experience. Those behaviours did not disappear after the fire, with the result that the life risk is often not addressed.

The second reason that a fire safety ethics is needed can be obscured by the first reason. The shocking behaviour of actors in the fire sector can make it more difficult to investigate and discuss underlying issues and philosophy.

The second reason for the need for a fire safety ethics is the quandary that confronts the fire safety professional on many buildings. There is too often a clear tension between the real needs of people in buildings and the funds available to meet those needs, because from the design stage onwards unrealistic and impractical assumptions are used. Real people are not properly considered. Design is not person centred.

This repeated dichotomy between the real needs of people on the one side and the unrealistic design and management of buildings on the other has not been resolved since the Grenfell disaster. The building stock remains, the people that use the buildings remain, the funding shortfalls remain. There also remain professionals in the sector who are not keen to change (and new ones arriving who seek only the high income the sector can provide). There will be no easy answers.

Examples of unethical behaviour

My own experience backs up many of the findings in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

My first degree was philosophy, and after other jobs I joined the fire brigade (later called the fire and rescue service) in Swansea in 1999. I served as a firefighter across several stations, (mixed rural, urban, suburban and industrial), eventually becoming a crew manager. After fifteen years of operational firefighting (including in high rise residential buildings) I was then promoted on to a role as fire safety inspection and enforcement

officer across the Swansea Bay area and was trained and became qualified in this position. Six years later I was forcibly retired by my employer due to injuries and moved on the next day to work as a fire officer, consultant and fire risk assessor for a social housing association about the same size as the one in which Grenfell Tower is situated. I was responsible for homes for around 9,000 people across over 400 residential buildings, many with the same problems as Grenfell Tower. I advised management and Board on fire strategy. I left that role after three and a half years for a complete career change away from fire.

My time as an enforcement officer in the fire service bridged the time of the Grenfell Tower fire and I saw the changes happen overnight. My work went from planned to reactive. Residents went from resistant to proactive. Building owners and managers went from needing all my persuasive powers (including enforcement), to agreeing many things I asked of them (although the agreement sometimes didn't result in action).

However, the underlying culture of the fire sector remained, as did many of the professionals who had worked prior to June 2017.

Private sector salaries in my sector noticeably improved, in some cases fees became surprisingly high. Before the Grenfell Tower fire there were excellent professionals and there were also unprofessional and unethical charlatans. After the fire, as demand for fire professionals rocketed, fees rose, and so did the presence of charlatans in the sector. As a housing association fire officer looking to contract work out for remediation of my buildings, I really struggled to find any firm that was reliably professional. I spent a lot of my time researching the claims of firms and individuals we were considering as contractors to carry out our essential life protection for residents.

The behaviour I will describe here of professionals relates later in this dissertation to my discussion of expertise and autonomy and how these can compete in discursive ethics. Expertise is surprisingly difficult to find in the fire sector.

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry shone a light on the behaviour of the fire risk assessor who had worked for the housing association that managed the tower. Carl Stokes was reported to have fabricated post-nominals, worked beyond his level of expertise, failed to identify the risks and horrifically failed the residents of Grenfell Tower but charged for his services at the rate a qualified and competent professional may have expected.

I know good, professional, qualified and competent fire risk assessors, but in my experience, Carl Stokes is not an exceptional person working in the field. There are many examples of unethical practice, I will here give one to illustrate.

I had a high-rise residential building in our stock that had many of the problems found in Grenfell Tower: flammable cladding, breaches in fire compartmentation (holes through which fire and smoke can travel), evacuation impaired people living on the upper floors

who would have been unable to get out in the event of a fire. In addition to these risks, this building had three storeys of parked cars inside the building footprint, and wooden balconies stacked one above the other and wooden cladding in addition to the other flammable cladding. It was justifiably regarded as a high-risk building.

After the Grenfell Tower fire, and before my arrival in post, the housing association I worked for had been very keen to address its problems with whatever advice and interim measures it could get. The remediation continued after I started working for them and the cost was enormous, running to several million pounds (they even seriously considered whether it was better to simply rebuild even though it was a relatively recent building).

After my arrival I reviewed the building and the assessments, including a report provided by a fire consultancy. I found their 100 plus page report on this high-risk residential building, full of photographs and commentary, perplexingly incompetent. I decided to do background checks on the company and the report author. I found the company owners and employees had no background in fire, no relevant experience in the assessment of buildings for fire, and no pertinent training and qualifications. The report author was a carpenter who'd spent many years fitting out the insides of yachts. After the Grenfell Tower disaster he had then done a weekend course in fire door assessment, jumped across to the fire sector, hugely increased his fees and called himself a consultant. He'd then made an incompetent assessment of our high-risk building, missed crucial details, commented on areas outside his area of knowledge and made judgement calls and given advice that were inconsistent with the safety requirements of the building. He recommended mitigation measures provided by named companies. I discovered these named companies shared the same address as his own company, and the same directors. The measures he suggested were unnecessary and unhelpful in reducing risk, and they would have been expensive.

The result was that he had not properly addressed the risk to our residents. The building remained unsafe. This was all after the Grenfell Tower fire.

The owner of the company was one of the people I had checked out. He'd been a keynote speaker at a fire conference I had attended, with his company as the main sponsor. The subject of the conference was 'competency' and ethical behaviour. Other speakers were very credible and well-known professionals at the very top of the sector, but this company owner, who also presented himself as an elder statesman in the fire sector, himself had no qualifications or experience of any worth. He was a generic businessman, and company records showed his businesses were flourishing across many areas in fire, using different company names.

I contacted the company with my detailed criticisms of their report. They eventually responded to say the assessor was no longer in their employ and offered to send their “senior fire assessor” to revisit the assessment and report for free.

I phoned up the fire service the “senior fire assessor” was said to work for and they told me the only individual they had of that name had worked for them for one year, as a recruit/trainee firefighter in a part time/on call village fire station. He no longer worked for them and of course had not provided training, only had it provided to him. He had not completed that very basic firefighting training.

I called the course provider named on the certificate he had provided. They told me it was a low-level two-day qualification that did not enable anyone to assess any building of any kind – it was a fire awareness taster course for beginners.

This was the company’s “senior” fire risk assessor, being sent from hundreds of miles away to work on a high-risk high rise residential building, to make amends for the previous dodgy report. I never dealt with that company again, but other companies doing very well in the UK that I checked out were of a similar standard of competence and ethical behaviour. We did find companies that could work for us, but such was the demand for competent professionals, it was not uncommon for them to move to a different company before a report was completed and supplied to us.

These post-Grenfell behaviours are not isolated examples in my experience. The unprofessional actors in the private sector are not the only ones that are part of the problems.

In Wales, social housing has a shortcut to advice straight from the primary authority responsible for enforcement. A small team of Fire Service officers has been seconded to provide guidance, as a means to improving safety and reducing the need for prosecutions and other levels of enforcement. Instead of being prosecuted, we can ask what we should do, and we can get on with doing it.

One sticking point for most people involved in managing buildings is the size of gap under a fire door that is acceptable. The fire door is an essential life protection measure. A large gap will allow smoke to affect people on the other side of a door, but a small gap is difficult to maintain for carpenters and people who use the door often find it will jam on a carpet. Costs can be prohibitive when doors across a housing stock need replacing.

In my role in social housing, several years after the Grenfell disaster raised the focus on the ability of a door to save lives, I was in a meeting, with all the Welsh housing associations, with the senior Fire Service officer responsible for Wales’s advice to housing associations.

Fire doors were justifiably a hot topic at the time. In the Grenfell Tower Fire “The rapid, mass failure of fire doors at Grenfell Tower was a critical reason for the blaze seeing a much higher casualty rate than other cladding fires around the world.”⁸ I cannot overstate the need for an effective fire door. Peter Apps, the go-to journalist on the subject puts it well:

This is why self-closing devices are so important. If a fierce fire breaks out suddenly, your body will revert to fight-or-flight mode. Your brain - evolved as it is to keep you alive in moments of danger - will disconnect from all thoughts other than those which involve escape and survival. This means people do not stop to close doors behind them. That isn't their fault, it's a consequence of tens of millions of years of evolution.

And so as the residents fled, their front doors stood open behind them. And all the smoke from the burning cladding, all of the toxic fumes including cyanide from the burning insulation and all of the additional smoke from the rapidly developing furniture fires inside their flats rolled out unhindered onto the landings.

As a result, when the other residents of the tower opened their front doors, they were confronted with an impenetrable wall of irritant, choking black smoke. Many - particularly those with health issues or children - closed the door immediately and phoned 999 instead of leaving. They were told to stay put and await rescue which - in most cases - would never come.⁹

The senior fire advisor in our Wales-wide housing association meeting encouraged open discussions without fear of scrutiny of stock, and someone said they were relieved about this, and as regards fire doors, could he start the discussion by telling us what threshold gap was the maximum allowed on a fire door?

He immediately said 8mm. Someone else asked if he was sure. He said he would email all of us with a comprehensive answer and the meeting moved swiftly along.

The email we all received was plagiarised verbatim from the first thing that popped up on Google. The source itself was an old blog from a commercial interest, had no references, and was not supported by anything in current guidance that I could find (at the time I was widely researching that specific subject for the thousands of doors in our stock). This senior Fire Service officer was the lead on advice and enforcement for social housing in Wales and the guidance he gave had no weight. I asked around my fire

service contacts about the man, and found his background, training and experience was in other areas of a fire service career but not fire safety. He knew little about fire safety engineering and had recently arrived in post as a career move from another department (this is common in the fire service where generic management abilities are regarded as sufficient to manage a skilled workforce).

He retired soon after this and went straight over to a housing association near to his home address, as their fire safety consultant. He had negotiated a salary with them that was nearly double the going rate, on the basis of having carried out his previous role as the senior advisor to Wales' housing associations. Yet another charlatan in the fire sector.

Again, all of this was years after Hackitt had said that competence and ethical behaviour were the answer to fix a broken sector. The rot in the fire safety sector has long been there, and remains, but it took the Grenfell Tower horror for it to be highlighted.

The actions of people across the broader sector were exposed in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. Arconic who knowingly sold flammable cladding for the refurbishment. Manse MasterDor who sold below standard fire doors to RBKC, worsened further by the wrong fixings and furniture. "When undamaged doors were ultimately tested by the Metropolitan Police after the fire, they failed in 15 minutes, not the 30 they had been advertised as possessing". Manse Masterdor knew they were supplying doors that were not up to the task but continued regardless.¹⁰

The Tenant Management Organisation who failed to routinely check that the doors were closing. Doors would jam open, and others would not close. Carl Stokes, the notorious fire risk assessor, failed to argue about the significance of fire doors that didn't close (amongst many other very significant oversights in his fire risk assessments). The London Fire Brigade who held on to Stay Put for way too long and cost so many lives. Building Control who failed to prevent the flammable cladding from being fitted. The Tenant Management Organisation who didn't act on legal notices served by London fire Brigade and routinely ignored residents' fears and regarded them as an inconvenience. They didn't listen to the residents. Kingspan who dishonestly marketed their insulation as suitable after manipulating tests and misrepresenting data. Celotex who were even worse than Kingspan, the Building Research Establishment who created testing conditions for products that were designed to pander to commercial interests and not safety.

Peter Apps summarises the wider situation in the UK:

"a combination of desperately permissive government guidance, poor enforcement, evasion of the rules and mismarketing led to a situation where

thousands of multi-storey residential blocks were clad with combustible materials. Grenfell was only ever the tip of this iceberg.”¹¹

The French firm Arconic, which supplied flammable cladding for the Grenfell Tower refurbishment, knew it should not be used on high rise buildings. This knowledge went all the way to the very top of the U.S. arm of the firm. Apps was on the team that broke the story through the Sunday Times when documents had been unsealed after Netflix applied to the US courts. Diane Perreiah, “President of the global building and construction arm at Arconic” has been exposed through a chain of emails to have held this knowledge in the years before the fire. That knowledge appears to have been held throughout the company, which sought to exploit lax regulation and enforcement in the UK to sell through its products here whilst changing its production over to a less flammable alternative for sales elsewhere.¹²

There is not room here to add further detail to the unethical behaviour, nor further examples though they are legion. A fire safety ethic could line up with Dame Hackitt’s calls for a new culture in the fire sector. Her reasoning was that she had uncovered “gaming” of the system, where companies, landlords, and fire safety professionals would loosely interpret the rules, guidance and laws in such a way as to appear to be following them. Following her work we saw that no matter what changes could be brought into the legal framework, that people in the sector could not be trusted to follow them in the spirit they were intended. She saw that ethics must be the overall steer.

The creation of a fire safety ethic will not prevent unethical behaviour - there will always be unethical actors. However, my preference for a discursive ethic along the lines discussed by Benhabib provides for a standpoint against which behaviour in fire safety can be measured. Benhabib’s ethical standpoint is not independent of people, we decide ourselves in discussion what the standard is and we continually revise that in light of changes that arise. We put full effort into understanding other people’s point of view by creating and sustaining a discursive milieu where the autonomous person is encouraged to fully express their view and argue for it.

The most practical application of the discursive fire safety ethic will be in resolving moral dilemmas.

Quandaries

I will centre all of these issues round one building that I worked on in my role in social housing, because in the one building it brings together all of my main strings. It demonstrates unethical behaviour in the fire sector. It shows where this leads to quandaries; It is an example of the need for protection of vulnerable people through a person-centred approach. It shows that standard majoritarian design fails to protect the

most vulnerable. It shows that an assessor has to exercise imagination, going beyond the simple prescriptions in the government guide, considering possible or likely fire development and its effects on people. It shows that in exercising the imagination here, the assessor does not need to place themselves in the building, but instead to consider the other human beings who live there. If as a fire risk assessor I imagine myself in their situation, I'm not imagining them in their situation. I'm not really considering *them*.

I'll call the building Quayside Apartments. Fixing the problems on this building cost several million pounds and took years.

Before we knew the building had significant problems, I made an initial visit where my intention was to quality assess some minor work that had been detailed for completion by an external fire risk assessment contractor. I had only seen the paperwork and I wanted to know the physical repair work had been done.

This six-storey block of flats had been described by this assessor as traditionally built of brick. To my surprise I found instead it was a timber frame structure clad with a flammable High-Pressure Laminate (HPL) for about two thirds of the building. HPL is made from compressed wood fibre. The previous assessor said it had three staircases for means of escape. It had only two. He found no significance in the under-croft car park, with cars parked directly beneath stacked timber balconies where the battens behind and supporting the flammable cladding were clearly visible directly above the cars, about two metres below. As a result, both sides of the flammable cladding would be exposed to a car fire, allowing potential rapid spread up the building façade. The building was described by him as having no known disabled people despite it being designed and built with some explicitly adapted flats, with residents with severe disabilities that would affect their ability to escape unaided. One man was a quadruple amputee and this was known.

Nothing was mentioned about the 78 riser cupboard doors that had been plugged around the frame with an intensely flammable yellow expanding foam, nor of the mess above every cross-corridor fire door where cabling had been run then plugged with the same flammable foam, providing a clear source for fire travel. This fire risk assessor had been paid repeatedly from 2016 to 2020 to provide a full fire risk assessment, and my housing association was naturally under the impression that the building was ok and required no significant work.

This is where a quandary arises in many ways. The fire risk assessor was senior to me in the sector – a Fellow of the IFE – the Institution of Fire Engineers (I was a high grade as 'Member', but to get to Fellow is quite a step further with at least fifteen additional years of high-level work). He had decades more experience than me and had even taken part in the drafting of the legislation we all worked to.

The first quandary was how to challenge his dangerous assessment, which I did in detail, explaining the various likely scenarios that would follow a number of different fires that could start in different parts of the building. Death of disabled occupants and full building collapse were the likely result from a number of sources of fire - for example anything that started in the car park below would likely grow faster than the fire service would be able to respond due to access difficulties, and the cladding would likely become involved, along with the stacked wooden balconies and their contents.

The IFE library had specific data on car fire development for speed and spread, and research published on a very similar building in Bristol called Monica Wills House where a disabled resident died in very similar circumstances to the set of circumstances presented in this building. There were no “unknowns” that could justify the surprisingly poor assessment by the contractor.

The list of interim and long-term improvements that followed my assessment was extensive and expensive, running to millions of pounds. It involved disruption to the residents as alarms were extended, sprinklers added, cladding and balconies removed and replaced. Confidence in the landlord was severely dented when information was provided to the residents about the danger their building presented to them in the event of a fire. There was liaison with the local Fire and Rescue Service enabling a change of strategy for them, government were kept informed especially for funding assistance and even a local church offered to have evacuation and welfare plans supported.

All evacuation impaired residents were identified and offered a person-centred fire risk assessment detailing particularly their own individual evacuation plan.

An assessment by a fire engineer, assisted by a forensic architect, provided a detailed response to the problem.

The rot in the fire sector is clear. This was not the only building in my stock where I came across work and assessments that gave me sleepless nights while I dealt with the personal challenge involved in addressing the problems.

The personal challenge was because my employer had not taken me on to run their costs up by millions of pounds and scare their residents. The fire risk assessors and other contractors that I “outed” through my work had a vested interest and were likely to bite back.

I had to move on my assessment – I couldn’t unsee what I’d seen, and I was in no doubt that the residents were exposed to unacceptable risk. I knew also that my friends still working in the fire and rescue service too would be exposed to unusual risk in any well-developed fire in this and several other of my buildings because of the speed and scale of fire development and the likelihood of total building collapse in times not

experienced on traditional builds, with signs of collapse not being as we normally expected.

These quandaries were common and could be boiled down to incompetence (or intentional unprofessional and unethical behaviour) against a backdrop of insufficient funds to fix the problem.

When I had been a firefighter travelling through the city in the fire engine, people waved as we passed, every day. Now nobody wanted to see me, hear from me or open an email from me.

Further underlying problems and design assumptions

There is a further need for ethics in fire safety practice. The interaction between cash on the one side and competence (or ethical professionalism) on the other is not the full picture. There is a further level of legally compliant and widely accepted design that I would like to focus on to bring out the need for person centred fire safety.

Design assumptions underlie the way our buildings are built and managed, with the average person's escape time reflected in many aspects of the building. For example, the duration of fire resistance of walls, ceilings and doors are decided on this basis. Corridor lengths, and whether these are subdivided by fire doors, are decided on the original basis of the expected speed of fire development and smoke spread versus the speed of movement of the average person. A safety factor is included so that Required Safe Egress Time is comfortably less than Available Safe Egress Time.

This building which we've called Quayside apartments had been designed from the outset to have evacuation impaired residents. Though not knowing which specific people or which specific impairments to base this design around, the plan was always to have a number of adapted flats. This was, however done in a piecemeal way, and though legally compliant and signed off for building regulations and insurance purposes, did not meet the safety needs of disabled residents. It could, for instance have had much shorter corridors with cross corridor doors to prevent fire and smoke travel and provide much more time for residents to move; a fire suppression system (sprinklers); a little extra room in the lift lobby for wheelchair users to safely await rescue with an intercom wired through to the ground floor entrance lobby to communicate with firefighters; evacuation lifts so that all those who get in can also get out. It had none of those measures, despite the designers and specifiers knowing that "adapted" flats were on every floor of the building.

One main assumption in all building design is the notional equation where the likely speed of fire development interacts with the ability of the building's elements to withstand that and the speed of evacuation of the average person. In our example

building, and almost all others, the design assumptions only support evacuation for an “average” person, so regardless of the additional risks I had identified, the building was not safe for anyone who moved more slowly than the fire and smoke.

This principle was objected to by Mark Chubb, who was Adjunct Lecturer and Research Faculty in John Jay College City University of New York teaching graduates for the MSc in Emergency Management:

“I've seen some recent discussions surrounding fire safety standards on LinkedIn that disturb me. It seems some fire engineers and fire safety practitioners consider it ethical to apply utilitarianism to their work. This doctrine suggests they should seek to deliver the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

In principle, this sounds appealing, especially when we are called upon to make decisions in the context of resource scarcity. But this form of majoritarian thinking marginalizes the concerns and interests of many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. In my opinion, setting minimum standards for safety based on this principle is morally bankrupt even when it seems economically rational.

In the absence of resource scarcity, when money is no object, pursuing "the greatest good for the greatest number" is often interpreted as "a rising tide floats all boats." Unfortunately, many people facing inundation have boats with holes in the bottom or no boats at all. A utilitarian approach suggests their deaths due to drowning is the price we must pay for living in a free society, which is usually assumed to be synonymous with a 'free market.'

Minimum standards for fire safety must accommodate and address the needs of the most vulnerable people in our society without exception. If we establish exit requirements based on median or mean evacuation times, we are actually saying, "too slow, so sad, too bad." As I said, unacceptable.

Fire engineers and fire safety practitioners should seek to improve fire safety for everyone.”¹³

I agree with Chubb’s resistance to a majoritarian approach, and I would like to focus on his mention of vulnerable people. In a fire safety context this is key, because the least vulnerable simply need the least assistance from design, build and management of buildings. If there is a reason to fire engineer, it is to protect the vulnerable.

If we posit the opposing view, we can see that it somewhat undermines the need for our discipline, or undermines itself, assuming what it sets out to prove.

I do have a strong intuitive need to get the most people out possible and would regard this as a relatively successful emergency response. I think that view would be widely shared. But that intuition falters when we are *planning* for safety, not reacting in an emergency. The majoritarian argument does not support vulnerable people and embodies a logical inconsistency.

The view opposing mine could be phrased as follows: Fire safety is to get the most people out in time, or to protect the most lives.

This assumes, logically, that the most people out is the summum bonum. The circularity becomes clear when the result being regarded as proof of success is based on the assumption that it sets out to prove.

The logical point is perhaps easier to see with the beginnings of real-world application, when financial cost is brought into the argument against me it could be constructed as follows: Fire safety is to get the most people out (that we can afford to).

The argument might in this construction appear to add more information, but closer inspection shows that it is simply more detail on a majoritarian position: what we regard as affordable is constrained by what we regard as appropriate to the majority. This leaves us with the most important question of why we regard a majority of people being an ethically superior choice to a vulnerable minority. The greatest happiness of the greatest number does not satisfy the ethical intuition that as fire safety practitioners we should, first and foremost, protect those that need it most.

To add more to this picture, we should remember in this context the possibility that the majority are more likely to be able to help themselves. Furthermore, this majority is not as sizeable as the previous UK Government's attitude might suggest: "an estimated 28.3% of social housing residents are likely to be evacuation impaired"¹⁴

There is a further disquieting aspect to majoritarian fire safety design. Designing explicitly for the most vulnerable (those who need assistance to escape – those who by definition cannot help themselves in good time), simultaneously protects the majority. A marginal increase in cost to protect those that need it most, (giving perhaps a stronger reason for the very existence of fire engineering) results in even greater numbers of people finding their way to safety. In other words, the intuition that we should get the most people out in an emergency is satisfied by designing for protection of vulnerable people at the outset. This kills both birds with one stone, for only a marginal cost increase if factored in at design stage.

However, with a lot of current thinking resulting in a fire engineering that protects only those who need it least, using a majoritarian model, then the *raison d'être* for fire safety

is less convincing. If instead it protected those who need it most, then this would protect everyone else.

Is a marginal increase in cost to build sufficient justification for failing to protect vulnerable people?

I believe there is more than hard cash to the picture, as we cannot isolate this from societal attitudes to vulnerable people and what lives are to be valued. I will discuss this in relation to the medical model of disability below.

I contacted Chubb to discuss his social media post with him and asked what he preferred to utilitarianism. He prefers a Rawlsian approach. I regard Chubb as an ally in fire safety ethics, but I believe that the resort to Rawls is mistaken when we aim to respond to real-world problems. Rawls' system takes as its aim the achievement of a position of independence from our lives in order to lend authority to moral decisions. Benhabib on the other hand prefers reality, with a moral system built around the facts of our lives, beginning with our lives as nurtured humans, and asking us to consider real other people in discussion with them.

“ The articulation of differences through civic and political associations is essential for us to comprehend and to come to appreciate the perspective of others. The feelings of friendship and solidarity result precisely through the extension of our moral and political imagination not in vacuo, or via a Rawlsian thought experiment, but through the actual confrontation in public life with the point of view of those who are otherwise strangers to us but who have become known to us through their public presence as voices and perspectives we have to take into account”.¹⁵

In underpinning this with analysis Benhabib uses, for example, the longstanding public/private distinction to show where excluded or marginalised voices may be the underlying reason for the mistaken belief that we need an independent authority in our ethics. When all the main traditional tasks and lives of women in a patriarchal society are excluded from justice and ethics by the line being drawn at a (man's) front door, then this voice is excluded from the rational decision-making processes in the parts of our lives where judicial, political and ethical power is situated. “An Englishman's home is his castle” is a principal that not only devalues, but silences women's voices and places everything in the home out of sight.

In that traditional home there are empathic women, nurturing lives together, interacting with each other, understanding each other and meeting each other's needs. This level of interaction, when lost from sight, has no influence on the less personal relationships outside of the home. Power becomes the dominant attitude and when struggles for power become problematic then a judgement is required from an independent and more powerful part. For Hobbes, this is the sovereign. His individuals

needing a moderator are self-interested mushrooms sprung from the earth without human relationships that have the depth of those Benhabib describes. There is no influence on this world view from Benhabib's human beings because they are unheard and are out of sight. Benhabib's human beings are not self-interested in the same sense as Hobbes's mushrooms, and the human beings behind the door see, hear and understand each other. These human beings do not seek abstract concepts of justice and independence from our views, they talk it through, hear each other and work towards a functioning life together.

Privatising the lives of women and children is argued to have skewed conceptions of justice and the good life towards increasingly metaphysical theories.

It is interesting to see how the public/private distinction in justice extends to the basic practicalities of the fire door in English and Welsh law. The front door to a flat is the front door to that conceptual castle, and fire risk assessors and fire service officers have long struggled with confidence in whether they have the right to assess the risk on the inside of that door. This tentative approach has even extended to the door itself, which has been the source of debate for many years. The door is crucial, but if its in the private domain, do we have the right to make judgement calls on it? Do we have the right to enforce on it?

The silencing of voices extends beyond those of women and children. In fire safety, disabled people, or their groups and representatives played no part in the writing of the UK Government guide specifically for people who are evacuation impaired. The guide has since been revised after continuing pressure following the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The original guide was called *Fire Safety Risk Assessment: Means of Escape for Disabled People* and was published as a later add-on to all the other guides, as a kind of afterthought (without the thought that groups representing disabled people should perhaps be asked to contribute).

I suggest that the exclusion of the voice of disabled people from the development of principles of fire engineering and fire safety has resulted in an ethos disconnected in a similar way to the silencing of women's voices with the Englishman's castle. Real lives become an inconvenience; they become impractical and disproportionate to support.

Person centred and disabled people

"Person Centred" is a concept that came to the forefront of the news in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower Fire when the UK Government reneged on its promise to follow all of the recommendations of the Inquiry.

It refused to follow the recommendation 33.22e which was "that the owner and manager of every high-rise residential building be required by law to prepare personal

emergency evacuation plans (PEEPs) for all residents whose ability to self-evacuate may be compromised (such as persons with reduced mobility or cognition)”¹⁶.

A High Court challenge by disability action group CLADDAG failed to overturn the government’s decision. The Court found that the decision was legal, and that the government decision was political, which it was entitled to make.¹⁷

The stated reason for not implementing this recommendation was that peeps were not “practical, proportionate or safe”.¹⁸

By ‘not practical’ I understood UK Government to mean there were too many difficulties in the identification of relevant people that need the plan, management of individual plans, and the people needed to assist. By ‘proportionate’ they refer to financial cost. By ‘safe’ they mean that standard evacuation from buildings relies on either simply leaving or being assisted by expert professionals (usually firefighters). Using friends, family, or neighbours as part of a slower, tailor-made evacuation after a fire is well-developed, could result in additional people attempting to travel through smoke logged corridors and areas affected by fire, as well as getting under the feet of firefighters.

The Government refusal to mandate the recommendation for peeps was controversial. It was challenged in a number of ways. Elspeth Grant’s was one of the most persistent voices. There was the high court challenge from disability action group CLADDAG, and the most effective challenge was housing associations and other landlords simply getting on with implementing a variety of forms of peeps.

When that government fell in a landslide election, new incumbents set about bringing in legislation, due to be implemented in April 2026, that mandates peeps.

Why has it been controversial? 40% of disabled residents died in the 24 storey tower. This has been described as a landmark case of disability discrimination. Journalist Peter Apps widens this perspective: “If you include relatives who stayed with these people and died alongside them, the number rises even further”.¹⁹

It is common in philosophy when we speak of a ‘person’ that we slip quickly into confusion about what we mean by this. This is not just philosophers.

In fire risk assessments, a person-centred approach starts with a person’s evacuation needs (as opposed to starting with the building’s structure, management, fire alarm, etc.).

If I supply some concrete examples of my work then it may develop the picture.

As a fire risk assessor drawing up a fire strategy or fire risk assessment, I was expected to make no specific provision for the disabled residents in my blocks of flats if they cannot escape unaided.

I am expected to specify work on elements of the building that support a strategy built around assumptions of the time spent to escape by the majority of people. My budget and my remit do not extend to suitable support or housing for people who can't get themselves away from fire.

I had hundreds of blocks of flats to assess, which have residents who have various abilities to evacuate.

Most people are assumed to be able to walk out unaided and get down the stairs, albeit slowly in many cases.

A minority have individual needs that were not met by standard design of my blocks of flats.

There are residents who are deaf or hard of hearing; some are visually impaired; some are wheelchair users and others have cognitive impairments.

I also had residents who cannot get out of bed without being mechanically hoisted. This isn't an exhaustive list but gives an idea of the variety of people whose needs aren't met in a general needs block of flats.

I can allocate funds to replacing doors that will hold back a fire long enough for someone like me to escape in good time, but I can't allocate funds to provide staff to evacuate someone who needs hoisting out of bed into a wheelchair.

I can't request a watermist system in the flat for someone who does not have the use of their legs, but I can request a complete rewire of the fire alarm system for the building as a whole if it supports the majority's means of escape.

We can afford to get a lift built in when the flats are erected, but we can't afford to build in a lift that can also be used for evacuation. It is easy to see why fire safety design is described by Mark Chubb as utilitarian.

Resolving the difficulty goes to the heart of the practical application of person-centred ethics.

In some ways, it is difficult to understand why there is resistance to providing fire safe homes for disabled people. Majoritarian reasons only stand if we are short sighted, because while it is true that the majority of us are not evacuation impaired, most of us will become evacuation impaired in our lifetimes.

To understand the context better we need to see the initial failure, (at design stage, and then in subsequent assumptions built on this for the management of buildings), to fully consider the people who will live in the buildings.

The first fact that underlies all issues is that the cheapest quote usually gets the contract to build, and then after that contract is won, "value engineering" is carried out

by the contractor to enable them to provide the building at the specification while using cheaper methods and materials and thereby increasing their own profit margins.

Here are some examples of where that affects fire safety. Lifts that get most people into buildings are not built to the standard that will get them out in a fire. It isn't much more expensive to make a lift an "evacuation lift", but it is nevertheless not as cheap as a standard lift, so these are not included in buildings. Therefore, if you can't get down the stairs, you can't get out.

Fire door closers are essential in stopping smoke and fire from spreading from the flat into the escape route. The cheapest fire door closer is a simple, strong spring that slams the door shut quickly, so that is the type that goes into most buildings. Anyone that moves slowly or isn't strong can get caught by that closer. Closers that allow for mobility impairments are not as cheap and are not put into buildings as standard.

A red bulb that can flash in the event of a fire alarm actuation will add a little cost to a fire alarm installation, so is not included as standard.

A sprinkler system is expensive to install after a build, and relatively inexpensive during a build, but less cheap than no sprinkler so is not included.

Value engineering might feel like it is the biggest problem, but underlying it are ideas of disability. I will discuss these before finally moving on to the idea of the person.

Benhabib discusses a genealogy of our political and ethical philosophies where Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant have a political person as an animal that is sprung, fully grown and male, with as much social relations as a mushroom. There are no mothers, sisters, daughters in the theoretical foundations of bourgeois male political philosophy. The self is an independent individual, and any relations that later develop are private, behind the locked and closed doors of the home.

In this thread, Lord Greenhaigh's argument that peeps are not practical, proportionate or safe, fits into a long line of patriarchal myopia, where the real life concerns of people living in a community with other people and understanding the needs of all, are behind the closed door of privacy, an idea to accompany the woman's role of being unnecessarily affective and insufficiently logical, essentially impractical, and unaffordable to the bourgeois male.

Benhabib argues extensively against the view that excludes the realities of our lives together. I would like to follow her approach in showing where the resistance to providing safety for disabled people is an example of an attitude that wears very effective blinkers. The result is that seeing the practical realities of lives in the built environment becomes effectively impossible for those wearing the blinkers.

I will begin my approach by looking at where the medical model of disability fails to secure a toehold when we see that our lives are spent in the built environment, that

“natural function” as a basis of understanding people’s needs ignores both our lives together and the built environment from which we all benefit.

By focussing on deviation from the mean, the Government resistance to peeps broadly aligns with a medical model of disability, which is described in a recent article in the British Medical Journal ²⁰. The article is useful because it will enable me to show where the differences between the social model and the medical model of disability are played out in the buildings we have.

The medical model

In *Naturalism and the social model of disability: allied or antithetical?* Dr Dominic A Sisti argues that “philosophical theories about the basic reality of disease, illness, health, function and impairment offer a more steady foundation for social or political critiques of disability”. He contrasts this basic reality of disease with the social model of disability “which posits that disability is socially and politically constructed”.

Sisti says that the social model is broadly accepted, “exemplified by the slow but steady progress in securing civil rights for persons with disabilities”. He acknowledges the success of the theory, but he argues against it for two reasons: it does not allow for the realities of disability, and it may not help the case for furtherance of rights for disabled people. He believes that where disagreement arises between the two opposing ideas that acceptance by those on the social model side of their implicit assumptions about physical impairments may assist them in coming closer to a more useful, pragmatic and realistic understanding provided by the medical model. He recognises that “there remains a palpable tension between disability studies scholars and activists and bioethicists; at times, the former may accuse the latter of ableist bias, and the latter may argue the former are irrational or illogical”.

Sisti uses the following definition: “Disability involves first a deviation in species typical functioning and then a social evaluation of harm.”

Sisti’s principal example around which his argument hinges is a specific impairment – “large atrial septal defects [which] are holes in the heart”, and how these and many other impairments are not sufficiently addressed by social models of disability. His preference is for a naturalistic conception of *function*. Large atrial septal defects (ASD) prevent the heart from functioning naturally, threaten the life of the person, and exemplify the implicit assumptions of a social model of disability in that its advocates would argue for lifesaving medical intervention. If I were to paraphrase, the social model relies on a medical model where it matters most – where life is at risk.

Sisti argues he can ground a social model of disability in function and dysfunction, and avoid questions of normativity because naturalism on disability “is meant as an

empirical appraisal of the unique capabilities across individuals—*not of individuals*—and across a spectrum of specific human capacities”.

I will argue that the social model has more relevance in our buildings (i.e. where most of us spend most of our lives).

Sisti’s argument hinges on the unavoidable fact of a life-threatening dysfunction. I will start from an equally unavoidable fact of adaptations that address *all* people’s inability to live unassisted and move around the built environment. I will argue that my start carries more force than a life-threatening dysfunction because Sisti’s argument relies on an unrealistic distance from the built environment - as if it’s not there.

In the debate about peeps, fundamental assumptions have not been exposed. I will look at doors, lifts and stairs to bring this out.

I don’t need stairs. A vertical ladder will suffice. My wife and I sleep in a crog loft and access this from a ship’s ladder. In value engineering, developers understand that stairs cost a lot of money, because stairs take the space of rooms that could be worth a lot in sale or rent. When a developer can reduce the number of stairwells within a building footprint, they can substantially increase profits from the liveable floorspace available.

Imagine if buildings didn’t need any stairs at all. We could all use vertical ladders instead. They would take a lot less space, we could fit many more flats into a building, get more homes into the same footprint and developers would make more money. My line of argument here may seem facetious, but I hope exposes an assumption used in our building design: adaptations for people’s needs are everywhere, and they come at a very substantial cost, especially where property prices are high.

In my time as a fire risk assessor, I used to enjoy stairwells. They weren’t used by residents, so the area was clean and quiet, and I could complete my paperwork in the building before leaving for the next one. The stairs are not a noticeable adaptation, but neither perhaps are the lifts that are used by most people.

This and many other things are adaptations of the built environment for our lives, and they come at a financial cost in build and maintenance.

From the starting point of a social model of disability, we can see that the built environment is always adapted. Yet somehow the word “adaptation” in fire safety applies only to work done for someone classified as disabled.

In summary, the built environment is an adaptation to our needs, but developers try to avoid providing for more than the needs of the majority. The voice of disabled people is not heard here.

ASD is used by Sisti to illustrate that there are life affecting conditions that very clearly cannot be blamed on society’s attitude to disability. From that point he argues that

recognition of this fact and then starting instead with a medical model provides a more sound base for improving the lives of disabled people than a social model that ignores the realities of dysfunction.

I argue that the naturalistic function basis for Sisti's argument operates in a vacuum with no built environment. When the built environment is included in the picture, his model collapses into whatever is regarded as acceptable cost.

The function model requires that the environment is aligned with a conception of a 'natural' state. The assumptions inherent in the notion of natural function and dysfunction don't work as soon as the real world and the *built* environment interacts with the person. The ASD is an argument that works only in isolation from an environment that isn't adapted to our needs. Most of us begin our lives with minor surgery (try a little naval gazing to confirm this), and from then on, our environment is adapted in myriad ways. Stairs, lifts, light switches.... wherever we look, if we wear no blinkers we see a built environment adapted to our needs.

Is there a stronger support for the function/dysfunction argument where there is no built environment?

My own injuries are potentially support for a medical model of disability, but only if the argument isn't allowed to run its course. When I injured both wrists in a fall I could no longer use a range of tools that I needed to be a firefighter.

I've adapted my home life to minimise the effects of the injuries (for instance my wife does all of the chainsaw work and anything that needs hammering, my son splits the wood, I no longer lift heavy weights, surf in the way I used to, ride a mountain bike, etc.) and I am able to work so long as I take account of my limits. There is a clear limit on what I can do, and many of the aspects of firefighting are beyond that limit. For instance, I can't cope with the vibration of power tools cutting into a car, can't smash a door with a sledgehammer, can't carry the heavier equipment, can't drag or push heavier weights including casualties. A medical model was used to categorise me as "disabled for firefighting purposes" and I lost my job in the fire service.

The permanent effect of these injuries also supports a medical model of disability when we look at surfing (a wild and natural environment). There is no adaptation that will allow me to duck-dive a surf board or pop up to my feet from the prone paddling position (something like an explosive push up resulting in standing). It's true that I can surf in some limited conditions using a different method, but there is an absolute line where surf conditions prevent me from going where I used to go and doing what I used to do. The definite environmental conditions meet my definite physical abilities, and no social model of disability can change that.

Looking at firefighting, there are many jobs I could have done on the incident ground. As it happens, I had been promoted to a rank that meant I hadn't used a sledgehammer on a door for many years. I hadn't physically carried anyone or anything heavy for a long time because I was in charge of incidents, leading first strike operations and managing the 'shout'. But had I still been at firefighter level, adaptations were not inconceivable, and I could have been valuable to the team, driving the fire engine, managing the pump, sending and recording messages etc. It was argued however that I might be needed to do something that was outside of my range, principally because there was a crewing shortage due to budget cuts.

This is one example that shows a medical model is a simpler argument to support when it is allied with financial cost. There would potentially need to be another firefighter available to do what I couldn't do. It was also argued that we can't keep 'knackered old firefighters' as our numbers would just mount up and it would be unsustainable. This collapses into the argument of financial limitations, as increasing the numbers of firefighters to support disabled firefighters would cost increasingly more over time.

A medical model is supported in a stronger sense by the injuries meeting the sea because there is an absolute line beyond which I cannot do certain things. The same would be true of cliffs and trees I can no longer climb.

In the context of housing the medical model can also be seen to be tightly linked with the financial cost.

I said above that a medical model of disability will only work if the argument isn't allowed to run its course. In the built environment the medical model needs to be allied with financial cost to have weight. My argument for this can be simplified as follows: everything we have in the built environment comes at a financial cost, and where we draw the line on *acceptable* cost defines what is acceptable as an aid.

We accept the cost of a set of stairs, sometimes more than one set. We accept the cost of lifts in the high-rise building. We accept the cost of piping water into every flat. We accept the cost of running electricity and telecoms for TV in to a flat. We accept the cost of a cleaner's wages for the building and often a window cleaner's wages.

We accept the cost of stairs, but not the extra floorspace and door required to protect a disabled person while they await rescue from the stairwell. We accept the cost of building in and maintaining lifts, but buildings usually don't have evacuation lifts (which are a marginally higher cost to build than the lifts that are usually specified). We accept the cost of piping water into every flat but not the marginal increase in cost of a sprinkler system. We accept the cost of running electricity and telecoms for TV in to a flat, but not for the marginal increase in cost of putting smoke detection in every room or a comms system through to the ground floor lobby that would enable a trapped disabled person to communicate with firefighters.

We take stairs for granted, not realising they are a mobility aid to save us from climbing the building like Alain Robert. In fact, for most of us it's the lift we take for granted in a high-rise building, not considering that it is a mobility aid.

If what is acceptable as a cost is due to majoritarian ideas, this does not take account of the fact that most of us will become disabled at some point in our lives, and most of us will, at some point in our lives, need assistance to leave a high-rise building (whether its on fire or not).

If the facts of this don't support the idea that provision is majoritarian, what is it?

My feeling is the line drawn on costs is set by what developers can get away with, what building owners can get away with, supported perhaps by societal attitudes to disabled people. This leaves the management of a building in an unrealistic scenario where people are unable to leave in good time in an emergency.

Proportionate, practical and safe

The response of the UK Government that it would be disproportionate to provide peeps to all disabled residents looks to be poorly supported, whether understood as a loosely medical model of disability or more prosaically the value engineering approach of building homes.

Next we move to the use of the value-laden term "practical". It appears partly to fall under the same category as "proportionate" (i.e. is it worth spending the money, time and resources on). For that part I will refer to my criticisms of a medical model, and at other parts of this dissertation to placing emphasis on the people in a person-centred fire safety ethic. For another sense of "practical" I will return below to the discursive ethic presented by Benhabib, showing where hers is a proposal for a practical real-life working method, based on the practical realities of humans from birth onwards living in a community of other concrete embodied selves.

Design assumptions in buildings, along with the firefighting tactics that meet those assumptions might be seen to support the Government assertion that peeps are not safe, mainly because the slower time taken by people means that the fire and smoke would be expected to impinge on the means of escape corridors and stairs, and the evacuating people would find their escape is hampered by the mass arrival of firefighters hurrying in with all the kit.

It seems clear that buildings are not safe enough for lots of people, so the Government position seems *prima facie* correct (that it's not practical or safe to have personal evacuation plans), but is their position morally supportable?

I would argue that the buildings should be suitable for the people that live in them – that is the reason for the buildings' existence, the reason they are built. It seems we are presented with a reductio when we are told that the building is unsuitable, therefore the provision of a plan to evacuate it is not proportionate, practical or safe.

The Golden Rule of Ethics

Danny Friedman KC provides a junction between ethics and fire safety. He is a barrister representing a group of Grenfell survivors and their families. He provided a stinging and detailed description of the causes of the fire and the way it, and the residents, were dealt with. I will argue however that his identification of the ultimate underlying cause shows a philosophical difficulty.

Trying to make sense of the Grenfell fire tragedy can be overwhelming. In one hellish incident with many repercussions for so many lives, we saw the results of countless individual actions; so many local and national government actions, so much policy, theory, law; so many moral attitudes. Having spent decades in a career in fire, I feel I struggle to step back and achieve distance. I know I'm not responsible, but I feel guilt.

There were many reasons that the tragedy at Grenfell Tower happened. The job of analysis is massive. It took over seven years from the fire for the inquiry to produce a report. The barrister who presented his opinion of underlying causes has done something most of us could not do – he has absorbed all the information, the actions, the policy and guidance and felt the pain of so many survivors and their families and presented a powerful attack on those responsible.

However, his understanding of the ultimate underlying causes of such behaviour does not draw a line under it for me, it does not provide the clarity I seek in trying to understand the disaster.

It is said that there are many personal qualities and attributes required in, for example, fire risk assessors. These include, amongst others, experience, training and education but there is an element that is often not stated which is essential in fire risk assessing and indeed is useful in most areas of fire sector work. That element is an exercising of the imagination. Fire risk assessors have to ask "what if" questions and follow through sequences of events in their mind, using their imagination and some calculations to picture fire and its effects on buildings and people. However, this exercise of the imagination does not require us to conceive of being in the place of the people living there, because it is not us that's important, it's the people themselves.

Danny Friedman's assertion that we "do not or cannot conceive" is an attempt to make sense of the profound horrors and identify an underlying moral precept that has been ignored or breached. His conclusions are to be respected. He has an unrivalled

expertise derived from many years spent closely working with survivors of the Grenfell fire and analysing with his team the myriad causes. His depth and breadth of knowledge is likely to be equalled by few, and his personal engagement with the ethics of the tragedy is genuine.

When he says we “do not” conceive, Friedman is possibly highlighting here the straightforward, blatant and at times evil disregard of ethical behaviour in the run up to the Grenfell tragedy.

My focus will be on the “cannot” side of his phrase, as a means of arguing that the “do not” could spring from conceptual misunderstandings. Friedman’s conclusions align with an ethical rule that is embedded in most world religions and is referred to as a simplification of those philosophies that profess to be outside of religion. The rule is ancient, but I do not find it is useful in fire safety, and it has epistemic limitations caused by the insertion of oneself into another’s position.

In my previous essays I followed David Cockburn and other philosophers in arguments that undermined the longstanding dualism that still has a hold on our ideas. I will not revisit those arguments here, but the conclusions to those arguments are useful in understanding that the idea that we are unable to conceive of being in another’s position arises from a dualist starting point and is an unhelpful approach.

I’ve shown in previous essays that though common, the idea that we can’t understand other people as we understand ourselves is a confusion. It is an amalgam of layers of mistaken thinking that include, for example, the idea that my essence or soul is separate from my body, that I recognise people by their bodies and therefore miss their essential selves, that from this a distance is unbridgeable. In my essay about antipathy to the body in philosophy, I said that philosophies themselves are partly to blame, but Ilham Dilman goes further, saying that we already harboured dualist confusions,

“it is not Descartes who put these into our thoughts; he only gave them a clear voice”.²¹

In my essay on Quinton, I wrote that Quinton’s “soul is separate from his body, and he argues in the *New York Review* that Plato and Descartes, most religions and indeed most people hold a broadly similar belief about the distinction between soul and body.”²² However, I said that Quinton fails to provide a satisfactory argument in favour of the separation between mind and body, because where it relies on our intuitions it fails. If we don’t already bring traces of dualism to our understanding, then we find that other conclusions are equally logically and intuitively possible.

What relevance does this have to a fire safety ethic? These are the stages in the argument I make here: Using previous essays I conclude that a separate body and soul is a view for which the main proponents give no satisfactory argument. It is equally

possible, even using Quinton's argument, to conclude that there is no separation. If we hold there is no separation, then the idea that we cannot see things from another person's point of view has less of a hold on us.

To put this another way, when we believe a person's essence is their separate soul, we are confronted by only a body. An invisible, intangible, essential and separate self or soul would indeed make it impossible to conceive something from another's point of view as that soul is out of reach in a way a body is not.

But when that dualistic thinking is stripped away, we are left with some facts and realities upon which to build a clearer view, that sees closeness with other people. Seyla Benhabib is a useful example here as she starts with the practical realities of life, with "the recognition that the subjects of reason are finite, embodied and fragile creatures, and not disembodied cogitos or abstract unities of transcendental apperception to which may belong one or more bodies".

"...I assume that the subject of reason is a human infant whose body can only be kept alive, whose needs can only be satisfied, and whose self can only develop within the human community to which it was born".²³

This starting point in a philosophy is relevant when we consider the UK Government's refusal to mandate peeps for disabled people, a refusal based on the idea not being "practical". The philosophy I intend to develop here from the same bases as Benhabib is grounded in the practical realities of the lives of human beings.

Benhabib develops a discursive ethic where the philosophical errors of dualism are left behind, and by locating our moral discourse in the heart of our real lives together. The model she develops allows for the continuing revision of ethical judgement through genuine open discussion in a community of people who work together to deliberate and challenge our notions.

We might say that this sounds something like a philosophy discussion group. It also sounds something like the United Nations, and Benhabib openly regards this as one similar discursive model.

The point I want to borrow from Benhabib is the realities of our life as socialised human beings in a setting of mutual care, and parental care. If that is a starting point instead of a confused dualist position, then the question of whether we can conceive of being in another's position should not arise. If we refute or reject the dualist notions and accept Benhabib's descriptions of human development and socialisation, then there feels no need to conceive of being in the other person's position. It is enough that we understand it from their point of view, without putting ourselves in their shoes.

To give an example of this attitude, Cockburn separately uses the paradigm of a mother's concern for her child. I will attempt to sharpen this image by asking the reader to picture themselves aware that their dearest loved one is being tortured.

The character and quality of the emotional pain this causes us, as someone concerned for our tortured child, is not of the same character as the concern for ourselves in the same position. Our concern is for them, not us.

Equally, in a common dramatic trope when the dreaded police officer's knock at the door is followed by the awful news that someone close has been killed, the first concern is "did they suffer?". In phrasing it this way, we are not signalling that we feel how awful it would be for ourselves to suffer a horrible death, our concern is for them.

The mother's care for her child demonstrates that we are not locked in our own view. In applying this to fire safety we might all benefit from an approach that focuses on another person's needs, particularly when that other person's needs are greater.

With the limited space I have here I would like to discuss where there appear to be limits to the discursive model in fire safety settings.

Autonomy and sprinklers – does discursive ethics become authoritarian?

Benhabib writes of the need for people in discussion to be autonomous individuals being able to exercise this autonomy and argue their case among equals.

This principle was stretched in one of my blocks of flats, possibly showing where discursive ethics collapses into an authoritarian ethic. I'll return to that real-life example after discussing the principle more broadly.

There are clear circumstances in Benhabib's description of the discursive situation where individuals would be excluded from the discussion. These can be exemplified by die-hard misogynists or religious fundamentalists who resort to the authority of a holy book when argumentation fails.

The discursive ethic asks all people who come to the table to be ingenuous in their need to reach agreement.

We can picture the Taliban failing to agree to these ground rules. They would be excluded after first being given the opportunity to rise to the occasion and enter into free and open discussion. There is therefore an explicit mechanism in discursive theory for an authoritarian removal of certain opinions from the room.

The block of flats I will discuss here is a high rise residential building, with fire safety risks that include compromised compartmentation (holes through which fire and smoke can spread), residents who routinely wedge their front doors open (which would

allow smoke directly into everyone else's means of escape corridor); wooden balconies stacked one above the other in such a way that would promote rapid external fire spread, external wall insulation made of a flammable substance similar to polystyrene and some parts of the external wall clad in timber; a basement car park which has well-researched fire safety challenges and a resident's demographic of mostly retired people, which greatly increases the proportion of people with mobility needs affecting their ability to evacuate.

As a fire risk assessor who also had the responsibility to 'remedy the defects' I was able to address some of these issues, but budget would not allow all to be fixed, and resident behaviour was difficult to change, especially the door wedging. The building remained unsafe.

This is a social housing block, but unlike Grenfell tower the residents are all leaseholders, meaning they had ownership of their flats and a stronger voice in the management of the whole block, which was managed by the Housing Association I worked for.

The risks were identified, and my head of department had flagged it up with Welsh Government. Funding was eventually provided to have a sprinkler system fitted throughout the building inside every flat, free of charge to both the resident and the housing association. In my other high rise residential buildings that had similar levels of risk we went straight ahead with the funding provided, fitting the sprinklers after consulting residents, which included informing them of the benefits and answering all queries and concerns over an extended period of time before the works commenced. All of the other buildings were occupied by residents who did not hold a lease, but were instead tenants, paying rent to the housing association who were landlord and owner of the whole building.

The leasehold ownership model in this building however appeared to change things. This building with residents who legally held greater autonomy in the decision-making process, and regularly exercised this right, has no sprinklers fitted because the residents rejected it. They stated in open meetings that they individually had various reasons, for example the disruption in their flat over the day and a half period of installation of the system; the likelihood of dust being temporarily created during the installation; the colour, shape, or material of the conduit holding the pipes; the (unfounded) worries that all heads throughout the building will operate if one person burns the toast; the risk of floods if the sprinkler head is knocked; the additional cost of a few pounds a year on the maintenance charge.

A talented and obviously warm-hearted individual who specialised entirely in resident liaison did his utmost to allay these fears and put other fears into context (for example the sprinkler only operates where there is a developed fire and nowhere else in the

building; there is no greater risk of flood than with any other water pipe in the home; it might reduce home insurance costs). I also stepped in and tried to persuade people to accept the free life-saving gift from government. The housing association also wrote formally to all residents to detail the facts (against for example the Hollywood version of sprinklers that all simultaneously operate throughout a building – a fantasy that is impossible as the water supply can only provide enough for a few detector heads to run). We all failed and the residents exercised autonomy, freely choosing as informed rational agents to reject the fire suppression system.

I'll make a bold statement here: I feel my experience, expertise, training and education across 25 years in fire, with a detailed and closely considered fire risk assessment across the building, trumps the autonomy of the residents. Given the authority, I would have forced the installation of the sprinkler system. It still bewilders me that I should have to consider the need to force this on the residents, given the background of the highly visible controversy and horror of Grenfell.

How does this square with discursive principles of autonomy and rationality?

Would overriding the residents be immoral? The sprinkler system may yet be forced on them, through the legal powers the landlord has as owner of the freehold on the building. Would that violate the autonomy of residents and thereby be an immoral act? Does this one example test discursive ethics beyond its limits?

I will argue in one further example below, that there will be cases where use of an authoritarian override function reaches the right decision, and perhaps instead of undermining discursive ethics it uses the principles as genuine aims and a genuine methodology, but that the override button sometimes still has to be pushed.

Specialised housing crisis – discursive ethics in action?

Discursive ethics may work in action in fire safety. I will describe a quandary that I came across, that overstretched the limits of the current assumptions in fire safety to the point that my housing association broke the mould in the UK and tried to tackle the problem at root.

A limited discursive approach was followed, but when this failed, an authoritarian resort to legal duty resulted. I take this a strong example of my argument that discursive ethics can ultimately collapse into an authoritarian ethic, but that it can nevertheless be taken as a working model for fire safety.

Across my stock (and across the UK), care homes for people with physical and cognitive impairments had been partly replaced by a different model, favouring autonomous individuals exercising direction over their care package and some of the budget, in buildings that came much closer to the style and lifestyle of family homes.

In my stock these were mostly very large bungalows in residential suburban areas with the same architecture, the only external distinguishing feature for the bungalows being the larger number of cars in the drive, configured for wheelchair users.

Internally, every effort was made to avoid an institutional feel. In fire safety terms this was reflected in a nuanced reaction to rules about, for example, signage for fire exits, by recognising that staff and residents know the building well enough to know which way to go in an emergency. No institutional signage made a difference to the feel of a home.

As I assessed the bungalows, again following on from flawed assessments in previous years by highly qualified individuals I repeatedly came across the same problem: residents would not be able to evacuate from a fire.

The care needs of residents were being met, but their evacuation needs were not. A range of cognitive and or physical impairments affected the individuals in the bungalows, no two homes were the same for the challenges that arose. Residents might for instance simply not respond appropriately to a fire alarm, either refusing to leave or returning into the building. Others needed to be slowly and carefully hoisted from a bed before being secured into a motorised wheelchair. One man could move himself, but only by dragging himself prone along the floor.

In each of the buildings, staffing at night was reduced to the minimum to reduce cost. This usually meant one staff member on duty, so assisting an evacuation, at times of greatest risk, was impossible. Expected time of fire development to a point where there was no chance of escape was quicker than the people could move or be assisted.

I put every mitigating measure in place possible within budget, but there was no avoiding the fact that staffing was the main issue, with sprinklers coming a close second place to help reduce risk. After a couple of years of trying to push the care providers to meet their legal staffing requirements, my concerns were escalated to executive level in the care companies, and to executive level in my housing association. At that point, a lot of discursive attitudes were displayed. In short, cards were on the table – budget constraints fully exposed, including the funding method, and the legal position (both fire safety law and housing law) was factored in to the discussion. A real attempt to put our own cases was made by each party, alongside a genuine wish to hear each other, and resolve the situation for the sake of residents. Money became the final hurdle, as funding was simply not available.

My housing association, led from decisions at Board and Chief Executive level, explored legal options for effecting change, as a means of forcing the hand of the funding provider (the local authority). They gave notice, as landlord, to the care companies in the bungalows, that they would be ending the contract. They would have to find somewhere else for their residents to live because my housing association was taking the bungalows back due to a breach in the contract requiring compliance with all

relevant laws. In this specific instance, this was fire safety law that requires means of escape be provided for all relevant people.

The immediate plan was to force the change, and longer term was to build similar care settings that provided all the structural support possible to underlie a suitable home as long as enough staff were provided.

This could be considered as a good example of discursive ethics in action in the first phase of the process because everyone there genuinely wanted to reach an agreement. In the second part, it could be said that discursive ethics failed, as force was required. However, there is a crucial gap in my description of this situation – the residents, the care staff and the residents' families were not at the table.

I would be disingenuous to say that I have properly tested a discursive ethic in the bungalow dilemma, as the voices of so many relevant people were not heard. This is a potential defence for the criticism of discursive ethics' collapse into an authoritarian ethic, and this should perhaps be one of the first steps in moving this along.

Conclusions

I have undertaken an initial survey of a new fire safety ethics, raising some reasons for an ethics and mentioning some difficulties with the Golden Rule, majoritarian and Rawlsian ethics. With a preference for Benhabib's discursive ethics (understood without golden rule intrusion), I have found that it is potentially useful but comes up against my sprinkler problem and my bungalow problem.

In fire safety ethics, expertise and even enforcement appears to play a disproportionate role in discursive ethics (as exemplified in the sprinkler and bungalow problems). If discursive ethics gives disproportionate weighting to experts, it does not appear to survive as originally described (with full and equal consideration given to all interests). It starts struggling as it gets into the detailed application to real fire safety examples. However, the bungalow example though identifying flaws in the discourse model also shows where it could work – potentially improving safety for residents in the longer term against seemingly insurmountable difficulties, by challenging and replacing assumptions in building design, build and use.

The conclusion appears to be that we should treat discursive, genuinely person-centred ethics as an aim in our fire safety processes, but resolution of some of the remaining difficulties remains a further project in this nascent area.

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