



PHILOSOPHY, LINGUISTICS  
& THEORY OF SCIENCE

FLOV.GU.SE

CENTRE FOR ETHICS,  
LAW & MENTAL HEALTH  
(CELAM)

CELAM.GU.SE

CENTRE FOR  
ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE  
RESEARCH (CARE)

CARE.GU.SE

LUND-GOTHENBURG  
RESPONSIBILITY  
PROJECT (LGRP)

LGRP.LU.SE

**FORTE**

Forskningsrådet för  
hälsa, arbetsliv och välfärd



Vetenskapsrådet

# TWO METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES FOR PRACTICAL ETHICS

Philosophy unit, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, February 21, 2019

CHRISTIAN MUNTHE, PROFESSOR OF PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY. EMAIL: CHRISTIAN.MUNTHE@GU.SE



# PRACTICAL ETHICS

- Research to design and justify answers to questions of what to do in concrete (real) practical contexts (individual to global politics), where conditions for choice are constrained (eg. time frames).
  - Professional ethics
  - Area ethics (agriculture, education, healthcare, research, technological industry, etc.)
  - Policy / institutional ethics
- **Aim is to solve a practical problem:** to actually make a difference to the practice.
- **Not primarily aimed at justifying/disqualifying general ethical theories** (but results may be used for that purpose in traditional philosophical applied ethics using reflective equilibrium)
- **Requires justified general ethical theories**, and justified descriptions of relevant facts



# STANDARD MODEL

1. **Identification of the relevant question** to address (preferably empirically informed by facts about the context): actors, options, etc.
2. **Facts about the context used to describe expected factual circumstances of potential ethical importance:** types of options, consequences, features of affected and acting parties, contextual considerations (eg. agreements, laws), uncertainties, etc.
3. **Analysis of what ethical theories may make a difference** to how the question is answered, and how.
4. Analysis of **which of these theories are justified** and not
5. Justified specific answer to the question.
6. Practical usefulness test of the answer

---

7. Final justified practical answer

revision of question to increase practical usefulness





# TWO CHALLENGES

## Pragmatics

- Adaptive behavior
- Non-compliance
- Intersectorial interference

Undermines both  
practical usefulness and  
justification prospects

## STANDARD MODEL

revision of question to increase practical usefulness

1. Identification of the relevant question to address (preferably empirically informed by facts about the context): actors, options, etc.
2. Facts about the context used to describe expected factual circumstances of potential ethical importance: types of options, consequences, features of affected and acting parties, contextual considerations (eg. agreements, laws), uncertainties, etc.
3. Analysis of what ethical theories may make a difference to how the question is answered, and how.
4. Analysis of which of these theories are justified and not
5. Justified specific answer to the question.
6. Practical usefulness test of the answer
7. Final justified practical answer

## Normative uncertainty

Ethical theories that  
support different  
conclusions have similar  
epistemic status

Practically useful  
justified answer  
impossible to reach



# PRAGMATICS: "WICKED PROBLEMS"

- Standard solution in philosophical applied ethics:
  - Adapted behavior: take into account in analysis! + implement incentives/rhetoric
  - Non-compliance: ignore and/or implement incentives/rhetoric!
  - Intersectorial interference: silence!
- But:
  - No end to adaption by adaption-prone actors
  - Incentives/rhetoric lead to more adaptive behavior and even more uncertainty
  - Incentives/rhetoric may increase rather than decrease non-compliance
  - Incentives/rhetoric change the justificatory prospects
  - **Ignoring non-compliance ignores the need for practically useful justified answers**
  - Broadened perspectives undermines the notion of practical ethics
- **Suggestion:**
  1. Avoid answers that require adaption that undermines justification
  2. Avoid answers that require adaption that risks worsening non-compliance
  3. Complement with sectoriaethical comparative analysis to rank the importance of considerations from different sectors
- Problems:
  - 1+2 Sensitive to strategic manipulation of "feasibility" by stakeholders
  - 3 seriously complicates practical ethical analysis
  - 1-3: final answer may not enjoy very strong ethical tyheoretical support,



# NORMATIVE UNCERTAINTY

- Debates in general ethical theory with a hope to decrease uncertainty will not help: practical ethics require answers within a set timeframe → pragmatics.
- Meta-normative scoring of degrees of epistemic credence only leads to new uncertainty at the meta-level, or not likely to resolve much uncertainty anyway → pragmatics
- "My favorite theory"-solution practically useless, as stakeholders and actors will have different favorite theories → pragmatics (and Johan G is currently disproving it anyway).
- Dominance-solution: look for answers that enjoy support of all competing ethical theories that make a difference.
  - Ay help resolve pragmatic challenges!
  - **BUT: There may be no such answers due to the range of ethical theories!**

# WHERE I AM AT THE MOMENT

- These two challenges should be linked!
- Normative uncertainty should (in practical ethics) be seen more as a pragmatic than a theoretical challenge
- This perspective may motivate that the range of ethical theories considered in a particular practical ethical analysis is limited, based on features of the practical context, so that the dominance solution
- However, this does not resolve the challenge of strategic manipulation:
  - If ethical analysis is adaptable to stakeholder responses to output of analysis, the model becomes open to money-pump strategies → severe irrationality.
  - That is: there has to be a limit to how much ethical justification can be transformed by pragmatic considerations.
  - BASED ON WHAT?