

One Ethics to Rule Them All: Ethical Systems in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

Objectives and Outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate understanding of Kant's categorical imperative
- Students engage in pre-writing activities and planning
- Students cooperate and communicate to build understanding
- Students will read texts closely and create meaning
- Students will engage in reflection about their close reading

Materials Needed:

- i. Digital display
- ii. White or chalk board
- iii. Markers
- iv. Digital or print copies of primary and secondary sources

Context of Class:

This lesson is envisioned as part of a larger, upper-level class on critical literary theory. This would fulfill a critical theory credit that might be needed by some English majors. The course is designed to approach critical theory through the analysis of fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction texts. For this class, students will read Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*, Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Card's *Ender's Game*, and Collins's *The Hunger Games*. They will also read excerpts of foundational theoretical texts from authors such as Kant, Sartre, Plato, and Nietzsche. Using these texts, students will delve into ethical, political, and philosophical issues at work within each text.

Tolkien explained that one of the reasons for writing *Lord of the Rings* was "the elucidation of truth and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home.'" With this quote in mind, students will work during this class period to determine what Tolkien might have meant by "good morals."

Prior Reading:

Primary Sources:

- The *Fellowship of the Ring* and will read the first chapter of *The Two Towers*, "The Departure of Boromir."

Secondary Sources:

- Kant's *Conceptions of the Categorical Imperative and the Will* (T.N. Pelegrinis)

Prior Knowledge:

- Students will have a basic understanding of what is meant by ethics.
- Students will have a basic understanding of Kant's ideas about ethical behavior and the categorical imperative.

Looking Forward:

-Students are preparing for their final paper, a short research project in which they examine an ethical dilemma present in one of our novels using one or more of the theoretical lenses explained in this lesson.

Introduction to Today's Class (10-15 minutes):

The day's objectives are displayed on the projector, as well as the deadline for the upcoming paper. The teacher connects today's individual objectives with the summative assessment. The teacher then bridges the day's objectives with a freewriting activity (then also displayed on projector).

Brainstorming Activity: Students will "freewrite" for about five minutes. They will jot down some ideas on the following topic(s):

- How do you define ethics?
- What are some of Kant's ideas about ethics?
- Based on your reading, what is the categorical imperative?
- What is meant by the term "ethical dilemma?"
- Do all ethical dilemmas have a solution? That is, is there such a thing as an ethical situation in which no right action is possible?

Collaboration: After the brainstorming activity, students will turn to their partner. There may be groups of three. They will compare their definitions, and they should note differences. For instance:

- Student A: Knowing right from wrong, following the rules
- Student B: Being a good person
- Student C: Ethics is not harming people

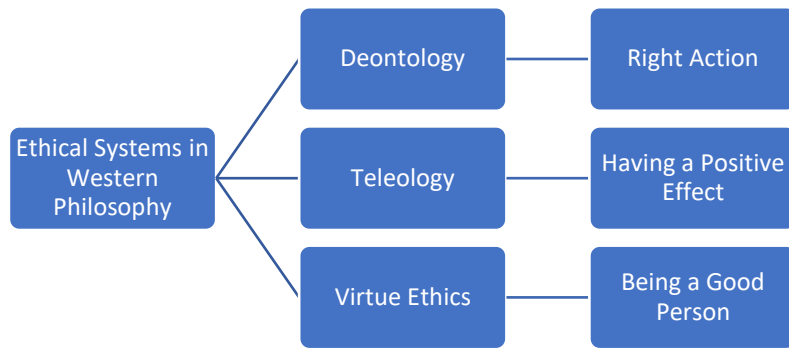
Synthesis: After the short conversations, the teacher will call the class to order and solicit answers, writing them on the board as a list. Teacher will engage in questioning of some students to clarify what is meant by certain statements.

A Note About Journals: Students compose their freewriting and journaling activity in Google Docs or Dropbox paper. I review student writing after class and provide feedback as part of formative assessments. This information should also be integrated into the group's presentation.

Overview of Main Event:

Introduction of New Knowledge (10 minutes):

Using the groups' definitions as a starting point, the teacher will introduce the concept of ethical philosophies. He or she will construct the following flowchart upon the whiteboard or chalkboard, but will omit the last column (this will be filled in as we go):



Teacher will assist the students with locating some of the items from the brainstormed list upon the flowchart. In this model:

- Student A's answer ("Ethics is knowing right from wrong") would fit beside "Right Action" on the chart. Explain that this is because Deontological Ethics puts stress on learning the duties or rules of a society.
- Student B's answer ("Being a good person") would belong with Virtue Ethics, because it emphasizes internal qualities (as opposed to rules or consequences).
- Student C's answer ("Ethics is not harming people") would belong with Teleological, because there is an emphasis on the consequences of your actions.

Synthesis: Explain to students that this information will be used in their upcoming final paper, in which students will identify an ethical dilemma from one of the texts we have read and will construct a 7-10 page research paper explaining why the situation is a dilemma (What is at stake? What are the choices that must be made? How is a person's virtue being questioned or suspended? What are the consequences of the choices? Etc) and analyzing the character's actions based on the ethical system and philosophers that they have researched.

Reinforcement: For homework, students will read the handout, attached.

Main Activity (10 minutes):

Explanation of Instructions: Students are to analyze the dilemma of Boromir at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. They should brainstorm with their group about the following topics:

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| -What is Boromir's dilemma? | -Is he acting ethically? Based on what system? |
| -What is at stake for him? | -Do ethical systems conflict in this situation. |
| -Does he believe he is acting ethically? | |

To facilitate diverse discussion, students may be assigned a "pro-Boromir" or "anti-Boromir" stance before the debate begins. This will prevent a unanimous decision which might obviate the need the discussion.

1. The teacher will serve as moderator for the debate.
2. One student representative from each side will put forth an argument.
3. Students on the other side will take a moment to develop a rebuttal (advanced)

students may not need this time).

4. After the rebuttal, the other debate team will put forth their argument.

5. Rebuttal ensues.

Note: Ideally, the debate will proceed in a respectful and civilized manner.

Note: Time permitting, each student should serve as group representative as they put forth their arguments in turn

Wrap-Up (5 Minutes):

Teacher will explain to students that the debate we held today is a miniature model of the type of thinking that will be expected from them on their final paper. They should spend the next few days identifying which novel they wish to discuss, what ethical dilemma they wish to pull apart and examine, and what ethical or theoretical lens they wish to serve as a “toolbox” for their work.

Explain to students that analyzing ethics and ethical systems is useful for several reasons.

-For creative writers, it is important to build characters that have authentic and believable motivations. For example, Thanos could be considered a teleologically ethical character because his focus is on the consequence of his actions.

-For reading and understanding texts, it is important to understand ethical systems to understand what potential arguments are being put forth by an author of speculative fiction. For example, *The Hunger Games*' Katniss Everdeen can be considered a model of Virtue Ethics because she has a strict code of ethics and follows it regardless of what will happen to her.

-For navigating your day to day life and making right choices, it is important to understand ethics so that you can examine the several facets of your own decision-making processes. For example, *Ender's Game*'s Ender Wiggin knows what he has been told is the right thing to do (Deontology), he knows what the consequences will be (Teleology), and he understands the voice of his own personal conscience (Virtue Ethics).

Before dismissal, display the following quote:

"I Do Not Deal in Absolute Evil" (from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, pages 243–244)

In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero. I do not think that at any rate any "rational being" is wholly evil.

Handout for Reading Homework:

Teleology or Utilitarian Ethics:

- Utilitarian ethics is a normative ethical system that is primarily concerned with the consequences of ethical decisions; therefore it can be described as a **teleological theory** or **consequentialist theory**, which are essentially the same thing, both having a notion that the consequence of the act is the most important determinant of the act being moral or not.
- Teleological reasoning takes into consideration that the ethical decision is dependent upon the consequences (“ends”) of the actions.
- In teleological reasoning, a person will do the right thing if the *consequences* of his or her actions are good.
- Additionally, if an action by a person was an act that was “not good,” but the consequences turned out to be “good,” under some theories of teleological reasoning, the act may be deemed a good ethical act. This is also referred to as “consequentialist moral reasoning,” where we locate morality in the consequences of our actions.
- As a result of the consequentialist nature of utilitarianism, the means to get to the ethical decision (“end”) are secondary; the end result is that which must be considered before determining the morality of the decision.

The Problems with Utilitarianism:

Like all normative theories of ethics, utilitarianism cannot address all of the ethical dilemmas we face.

Sometimes using utilitarian principles may be harmful to a group of people or to an individual. Some of the major problems with utilitarian consequentialist ethics include the following:

- **Measuring happiness is difficult.** Happiness is subjective and as a result is open to interpretation.
- **Utilitarian ethics is concerned about the consequences of our actions, regardless of the action itself.** However, it can be difficult to know what the consequences of our actions will be because of the variables that we do not control.
- **Desired ethical consequences that actually result from our actions do not always happen immediately.** If the desired consequences of our actions do not occur immediately, how long must we wait for those good consequences to develop before we can say the action was ethical? Likewise, how long are we to wait to deem the consequences as positive or negative?
- **Happiness should not be the only consequence or goal that matters in some ethical dilemmas.** Some goals of the ethical decision, such as human rights, may matter more than the consequences of the action. For example, consider a detective who is investigating a series of sexual assaults has located evidence which is not admissible in court but clearly demonstrates that a suspect is guilty of the crimes. The detective realizes that the suspect is likely to recommit the crime, and therefore decides to plant false forensic evidence on the suspect to implicate him. While this action may result in positive consequences (and the greater happiness for the greater number of people), the actions are wrong and cannot be condoned.
- **When utilitarian decisions benefit the majority at the expense of the minority, the minority’s rights may not be taken into account.** Utilitarian principles often run contrary to individual’s rights, and at times are the antithesis to concepts of modern justice theories. When we are tempted to make a decision that will positively impact the majority, we must also consider the negative impact on the minority.

Deontology:

- Probably the most complex of all the ethical systems we look at here is Kantian logic, which is a deontological theory. The word *deontology* comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning “obligation” or “duty.” It is an ethical system primarily concerned with one’s duty. It is also known as ethical formalism or absolutism.
- Deontology was formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant believed that the end result is not of primary importance; rather, the real importance is in determining the moral intent of a decision or action itself. Kant would assess the morality of one’s action and disregard the consequences. He further

believed that we have duties that are imperative and that these duties must never be abandoned, regardless of the anticipated outcome. These duties, according to Kant, are absolute and must be applied to everyone equally.

- A duty is something we are required to execute, regardless of whether we want to or not. The duty may have a personal or professional negative consequence attached to it, but as it is a requirement or obligation, it is absolute and/or imperative.
- Kant distinguished two types of duties: conditional or hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives.
 - A hypothetical imperative is a duty that is necessary to accomplish a specific goal. It is something that we do to achieve an end.
 - A categorical imperative is an unconditional rule or duty. Regardless of the impact on you that the decision may cause, the duty remains the same and must be done. In this way, the act is unrelated to the end result; it is a duty regardless of the outcome.

Virtue Ethics:

- It may, initially, be identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach that emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or that emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism).
- A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor—something that, as we say, goes all the way down.
- To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset. A significant aspect of this mindset is the wholehearted acceptance of a distinctive range of considerations as reasons for action.
- An honest person cannot be identified simply as one who, for example, practices honest dealing and does not cheat. The honest person recognizes “That would be a lie” as a strong (though perhaps not overriding) reason for not making certain statements in certain circumstances, and gives due, but not overriding, weight to “That would be the truth” as a reason for making them.
- An honest person’s reasons and choices with respect to honest and dishonest actions reflect her views about honesty, truth, and deception—but of course such views manifest themselves with respect to other actions, and to emotional reactions as well.
- Possessing a virtue is a matter of degree. To possess such a disposition fully is to possess full or perfect virtue, which is rare, and there are a number of ways of falling short of this ideal (Athanasoulis 2000). Most people who can truly be described as fairly virtuous, and certainly markedly better than those who can truly be described as dishonest, self-centred and greedy, still have their blind spots—little areas where they do not act for the reasons one would expect.

Sources:

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