The same ethical principles – but different positions

Levels 9 and 10,
Ethical Capability,
sample unit of work

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Introduction

Overview of the unit of work

**Title:** The same ethical principles – but different positions

**Timing (approximate):** 2 sessions (100 minutes total)

**Description:** In Session 1, students review the relationship between ethical concepts and principles and reasons why these may differ between people and groups (Ethical Capability, Levels 7 and 8, [VCECU015](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=7-8&search=98bc4e0a-7e7d-4543-9710-119e5d2c2975)). They consider how shared ethical principles may nevertheless lead to different actions. The teacher introduces a range of reasons to explain why this might be so, using simple examples stimulated by considering ethical concepts valued by some Australians.

 In Session 2, students apply and further develop their learning as to why ethical concepts and principles may be shared but nevertheless result in different actions by considering the influence of culture, philosophical thought and world views. The ethical issue of the treatment of animals is used to explore this. Students analyse an animal welfare or animal rights position on the treatment of animals and apply their learning to a laboratory, marine theme park or zoo context concerning the treatment of animals.

 Sessions may be taught individually, sequentially or non-sequentially.

**Assessment:** Assessment in the Capabilities involves teachers identifying evidence of students’ learning progress. Assessment could be formative or summative, and it could occur at the beginning of the introduction phase (for example, as pre-assessment) or during the practice phase. Each student is assessed against the relevant achievement standard towards which they are progressing.

 Opportunities for assessment are detailed in each session:

* [Session 1 assessment](#Assessment1)
* [Session 2 assessment](#Assessment2).

Links to the Victorian Curriculum F–10

**Curriculum area and levels:** Ethical Capability, Levels 9 and 10

**Content description:** Explore a range of ethical problems and examine the extent to which different positions are related to commonly held ethical concepts and principles, considering the influence of cultural norms, religion, world views and philosophical thought ([VCECU020](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=9-10&search=ba0647a3-45c8-441b-bbf4-052826b9a335))

**Achievement standard extract:** [Students] examine complex issues … and analyse commonality and difference between different positions.

Unpacking content description VCECU020

Key concepts and ideas

* People use the ethical concepts that they value as a basis for their guiding ethical principles.
* Sometimes different people value the same ethical concepts and share the same guiding principles, but they reach different positions on what actions might result from the shared ethical principle.
* There are several reasons why people may agree on an ethical principle but disagree on what actions should be undertaken when faced with an ethical issue.
* Cultural norms, religions and world views, and philosophical thought have a significant influence on how ethical principles are interpreted and applied.

Key teaching points

The following key teaching points should be covered in the explicit teaching phases in this unit of work.

Groups and individuals may be guided by the same valued ethical concepts and associated principles but their positions on what actions should be taken in response to an issue may differ. There are reasons why positions may differ. These reasons may include differences in:

* context, experience, or knowledge bases to draw on and hence different understanding of what the consequences of particular actions might be
* responsibilities or goals
* levels of power and influence
* cultural, religious or philosophical backgrounds that have informed how a particular ethical principle is understood
* understanding of how to interpret certain laws or rights (e.g. property) and how they relate to the shared ethical principle
* knowledge of the range of ethical principles available to help guide action, beyond the shared principle, leading to differences in the overall set of principles
* ways of making decisions, for example differences regarding the importance of taking into account feelings, conscience, reasoning or different dispositions.

Note, these key teaching points share some similarities with the teaching points for the VCAA’s sample unit of work ‘Investigating why ethical principles may differ between people and groups’, which covers Ethical Capability Levels 7 and 8 content description VCECU015 and is published on the [VCAA’s website](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/resources/ethical-capability/Pages/Help-me-find-a-teaching-resource.aspx). Coverage of this content description is assumed as prior learning for this sample unit of work.

Further reading

If you would like to know more about the key concepts and ideas for this content description, refer to the following resources.

* [Aristotle’s Ethics](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/), Richard Kraut, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – An academic overview
* [Jeremy Bentham](https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/entries/bentham/), James E Crimmins, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – An introduction to the philosophical thought of Jeremy Bentham

Focus questions

The following focus questions are used to support inquiry and inspire, challenge or extend student thinking.

Session 1

* If people have different positions on an issue, does that mean that they have different ethical principles?
* Why might ethical principles that are shared by individuals and groups lead to different actions?

Session 2

* What is the value in knowing the reasons that underlie opposing positions on the action to take in response to an ethical issue?

Session 1

**Learning intentions:** Today we are learning about a range of reasons that may explain why an ethical concept and principle may be shared by people but nevertheless lead to different actions. By the end of this session, you will be able to:

* identify some shared common ethical concepts and associated ethical principles
* explain why people who share the same valued ethical concepts and principles can hold different positions on an issue.

**Focus questions:** If people have different positions on an issue, does that mean that they have different ethical principles?

 Why might ethical principles that are shared by individuals and groups lead to different actions?

**Success criteria:** I can identify ethical concepts that are valued by some people in Australian society and commonly held ethical principles that derive from these concepts.

 I can explain, using examples, why different actions might result from shared ethical concepts and principles.

**Assumed prior learning:** Ethical Capability

 Levels 5 and 6 – Discuss how ethical principles can be used as the basis for action, considering the influence of cultural norms, religion, world views and philosophical thought on these principles ([VCECU010](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=5-6&search=c5865790-c9e5-4a03-bc4f-5ad65877411e))

 Levels 7 and 8 – Investigate why ethical principles may differ between people and groups, considering the influence of cultural norms, religion, world views and philosophical thought ([VCECU015](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=7-8&search=98bc4e0a-7e7d-4543-9710-119e5d2c2975))

 Levels 7 and 8 – Explore the contested meaning of concepts including freedom, justice, and rights and responsibilities, and the extent they are and should be valued by different individuals and groups ([VCECU014](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=7-8&search=aa5a00d5-8b53-4e35-b2a9-913d8c22ec04))

 Levels 9 and 10 – Investigate the connections and distinctions between and the relative value of concepts including fairness and equality, and respect and tolerance ([VCECU019](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=9-10&search=45bca061-8bef-4f82-ab5a-3efd0d86b6e9))

**Ass****essment:** Opportunities for assessment include:

* teacher observation during shared practice and independent practice
* student self-assessment using success criteria (can be used formatively when students reflect on their next steps)
* submission of individual reflections from the independent practice phase (can be used summatively, assessing against the achievement standard, or formatively).

**Resources:** [Citizenship test: Australians around the country have their say on values](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-20/australians-share-values-after-citizenship-test-ovehaul-proposed/8458154), ABC News

 Ethical concept cards and ethical principle cards ([Appendix 1](#Appendix1) and [Appendix 2](#Appendix2))

Learning sequence

Introduction and shared practice

The teacher explains that the class will examine some of the ethical concepts that are highly valued by some people in Australian society. The class will establish ethical principles that arise from these concepts and discuss how these principles are enacted in our society.

In pairs or small groups students are given a collection of ethical concept cards ([Appendix 1](#Appendix1)). They identify which of these concepts they think are highly valued in Australian society.

They examine the sample of citizens in the ABC News article [Citizenship test: Australians around the country have their say on values](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-20/australians-share-values-after-citizenship-test-ovehaul-proposed/8458154), identify the concept/s that each person values and then refine their initial list. They discuss connections between some of the concepts in their list and why some might be more or less valued than others, drawing on reasons given by people in the news article as well as prior learning.

The teacher then hands out the ethical principle cards ([Appendix 2](#Appendix2)) and in pairs or small groups students make links between at least one concept and one principle – for example, valuing the concepts of ‘justice’ or ‘rights’ links to the ethical principle ‘Act in a way that protects human rights.’ Students may use a concept card to link to more than one principle. The teacher monitors student progress, providing feedback on student understanding of how ethical concepts and principles are linked.

The teacher draws a three-column table on the board (see Table 1, below). Student pairs or small groups nominate an ethical concept and a linked principle, and the class fills in the first two columns of the table together.

The teacher works with the class to fill in the third column, ‘Example action’, for the first few rows and then the student pairs or small groups fill in the rest of the third column, producing one completed table per group.

Table 1 (example)

| Ethical concept/s | Example ethical principle | Example action |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fairness | Treat others as you would want to be treated. | Treating everyone in your work team with respect |
| FreedomResponsibility | It is not always important to obey authority. | Creating a safe environment for someone to speak up when they think an unethical decision has been made |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Explicit teaching and shared practice

*Refer to the* [*Key teaching points*](#Keyteachingpoints) *in this document.*

Students share their completed tables with their peers and identify commonalities and discrepancies in the listed actions. They make particular note of actions that seem to contradict or strongly oppose each other. It may be that agreed principles lead to divergent, even contradictory, actions.

An example of this might be free speech. People might agree with the principle of freedom of speech but reach different or even opposite positions about when ‘free’ speech might be exercised, limited, restricted or censored.

The teacher leads whole-group reflection by calling on student groups to share their findings with the class. Students note instances where they agree on an ethical concept and/or principle but have applied it in opposing ways in the ‘Example action’ column. If there are no instances of opposing actions from the same principle, work with students to construct an example to support the discussion.

The teacher revisits the reasons given in the introduction and shared practice phase about why valued ethical concepts and principles may differ, in order to fully develop the key teaching points and assist students to fill gaps in their understanding. The teacher can use a row from the three-column table to stimulate examples that illustrate the key teaching points. For example, building on the free speech example above, opposing positions on censorship might be influenced by different views on how people might be affected by or interpret certain types of content, such as violence.

Independent practice, reflection and evaluation

Students choose a row in their three-column table that contains opposing actions (but a different example to that selected by the teacher in the explicit teaching and shared practice phase). They independently reflect on why these actions might differ so much, supporting their thought with illustrative examples drawn from their selected row. Note, if there are no opposing actions left to select, the student could be asked to think of an example and use this as the basis of their reflection.

Students conclude by writing an overall response to the focus question, supported by examples.

Session 2

**Learning intentions:** Today we are thinking more deeply about the influence that world views and philosophical thought might have on how ethical principles are interpreted and applied. As an example, we will look at the issue of treatment of animals. By the end of this session you will be able to:

* analyse commonality and differences between different positions on this issue.

**Focus questions:** If people have different positions on an issue, does that mean that they have different ethical principles? (As per Session 1.)

 What is the value in knowing the reasons that underlie opposing positions on the action to take in response to an ethical issue?

**Success criteria:** I can identify and explain the influence of culture, world views and philosophical thought on different positions, using the treatment of animals as an example.

 I can apply my understanding to analyse why people might share a common ethical principle that we should care for animals and yet hold different positions on an ethical issue such as how we should treat animals.

**Assumed prior learning:** As per Session 1

**As****sessment:** Opportunities for assessment include:

* student pairs or small group work in the shared practice phase (can be used formatively, with teacher feedback used to progress student learning towards the achievement standard)
* student self-assessment using student success criteria (can be used formatively when students reflect on their next steps)
* submission of student work from the independent practice and reflection/evaluation phases (can be used summatively).

**Re****sources:** *Please note, activist websites may contain provocative text and images. Please check all resources for suitability for students before using.*

[Aristotle’s worldview on the natural hierarchy of living beings](https://www.iep.utm.edu/anim-eth/#SH1a), Animals and Ethics, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

 [What is animal rights?](https://www.peta.org.uk/action/what-is-animal-rights/) People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)

 [Animal welfare and animal rights are very different beasts](https://theconversation.com/animal-welfare-and-animal-rights-are-very-different-beasts-26848), Robert John Young, The Conversation

[How many pets are there in Australia?](https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/how-many-pets-are-there-in-australia/) RSPCA Knowledgebase

 [What do I need to know before I get a new pet?](https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/what-do-i-need-to-know-before-i-get-a-new-pet/) RSPCA Knowledgebase

 [What to do about Liberia’s island colony of abandoned lab chimps?](https://theconversation.com/what-to-do-about-liberias-island-colony-of-abandoned-lab-chimps-64646) Ben Garrod, The Conversation – An article about the treatment of abandoned laboratory chimpanzees

 [California bans orca captivity and breeding](https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/orca-captivity-ban-california-seaworld_n_57d8c35de4b09d7a68808c30?ri18n=true), Dominique Mosbergen, Huffington Post

 [Op-ed: Harambe the gorilla dies, meat-eaters grieve,](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-singer-dawn-harambe-death-zoo-20160605-snap-story.html) Peter Singer and Karen Dawn, Los Angeles Times – Reactions to the death of zoo animal Harambe the gorilla

Learning sequence

Introduction

*Refer to the* [*Key teaching points*](#Keyteachingpoints) *in this document.*

Via a show of hands, the teacher identifies students who have (or have ever had) pets.

The teacher also asks, how many students know of others who have household pets?

The teacher introduces statistics about household pets (see [How many pets are there in Australia?](https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/how-many-pets-are-there-in-australia/) RSPCA Knowledgebase) to demonstrate that many Australians have relationships with domesticated animals as pets.

The class briefly considers why people have pets. They consider what ethical principle/s might underlie the keeping of pets, with the teacher guiding students to identify a possible shared principle: we should care for animals. If the class requires prompting, the teacher could raise the fact that many people source their pets from rescue centres and encourage the class to think about why this might be the case.

The teacher draws the class’s attention to the RSPCA’s information about caring for pets (see [What do I need to know before I get a new pet?](https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/what-do-i-need-to-know-before-i-get-a-new-pet/) RSPCA Knowledgebase). The teacher asks the students to identify where there might be disagreements about specific actions to do with looking after pets, even though there is a shared underlying principle of care. The teacher could use the section on pets fitting into people’s lifestyle and priorities in the resource as a prompt, as there may be disagreements over how much a person should adapt their lifestyle to care for a pet.

Using examples of the treatment of pets, the teacher recaps the key teaching points covered in Session 1, including reasons why people’s positions and actions may differ.

The teacher explains that the class will now look more deeply at one of the reasons: differences in cultural, religious or philosophical backgrounds that have informed how a particular ethical principle is understood.

Explicit teaching

*Refer to the* [*Key teaching points*](#Keyteachingpoints) *in this document.*

The teacher raises different views on allowing dogs inside – typically the views of those with working dogs and those with pets – as an example of cultural influences on how an ethical principle is interpreted.

The teacher explains that the class will now examine two different positions on how we should care for animals (beyond just pets) as a way to consider philosophical and world view backgrounds.

The teacher introduces the class to the world view on the natural hierarchy of living beings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (see [Aristotle’s worldview on the natural hierarchy of living beings](https://www.iep.utm.edu/anim-eth/#SH1a), Animals and Ethics, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

The teacher explains that Aristotle’s world view has been very influential for over 2000 years. They explain that a contrary world view has also been advocated since ancient times, advocating that animals – and sometimes other living entities and/or non-living entities – have inherent worth that is independent of their usefulness to humans. The teacher explains that animal rights activists have this latter world view – see the PETA resource [What is animal rights?](https://www.peta.org.uk/action/what-is-animal-rights/) – and that they also draw on the ethical principle suggested by influential 18th and 19th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham: ‘The question is not, can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But, can they suffer?’ The teacher explains that an action stemming from this shared ethical principle might be choosing to be vegan.

Shared practice

The teacher gives students a copy of The Conversation article [Animal welfare and animal rights are very different beasts](https://theconversation.com/animal-welfare-and-animal-rights-are-very-different-beasts-26848).

Students work in pairs or small groups to read the article and complete the following questions.

1. What is the ethical principle that both animal rights and animal welfare proponents share?

2. What are some actions that an animal welfare proponent would be prepared to take but an animal rights proponent would not?

3. To what extent is Aristotle’s world view reflected in the article?

4. How many reasons are there in the article for sharing an ethical principle but coming to a different position on acceptable actions? Fill in the following table.

Table 2

| Reason | Reflected in article?Yes/No | If ‘Yes’, include a supporting quote |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Different context, experience, or knowledge base to draw on and different understanding of what the consequences of particular actions might be |  |  |
| Different responsibilities or goals |  |  |
| Different levels of power and influence |  |  |
| Different cultural, religious or philosophical backgrounds that have informed how a particular ethical principle is understood  |  |  |
| Different understanding of how to interpret certain laws or rights (e.g. property) and how they relate to the shared ethical principle |  |  |
| Different knowledge of the range of ethical principles available to help guide action, beyond the shared principle, leading to differences in the overall set of principles |  |  |
| Different ways of making decisions, for example differences regarding the importance of taking into account feelings, conscience, reasoning or different dispositions  |  |  |

The teacher assesses and consolidates student understanding by asking each pair or small group to nominate a quote and the rest of the class to link it to a reason given in the table. The teacher listens for and corrects any misunderstandings. The teacher could give pairs and small groups an opportunity to refine their tables before submitting them.

Independent practice

Each student selects one of the following as their focus ethical issue:

* the treatment of abandoned laboratory chimpanzees
* orca captivity and breeding
* the death of the zoo gorilla Harambe.

The teacher gives students a relevant article about the issue (see [Resources](#Resources2)). Students then complete the following questions.

1. Describe the opposing positions given in the article.

2. Find evidence in the article to identify at least one ethical principle that the opposing sides are likely to have in common and reasons why their views are different.

3. Imagine that you are a journalist interviewing representatives of each side. You have read the article but want to understand more about why they hold their positions. Write out some questions that you could ask them. Don’t simply ask, ‘Why do you take this position?’ Be more specific, drawing on the reasons that typically underlie different positions.

Reflection and evaluation

Students write a response to the second focus question for the session: What is the value in knowing the reasons that underlie opposing positions on what action to take in response to an ethical issue?

Students can also write a general response to the following question: How can understanding the factors that underlie shared ethical principles help people understand their own and the opposing side’s view?

Students use a specific context from the list below (or construct their own) to help frame their reflection:

* zoos (for example, the positions of those wanting to abolish animals in captivity and those who support it)
* eating animal products (for example, the different positions of vegetarians and vegans)
* abandoning Earth to live on space stations or other planets when Earth’s resources are exhausted or the planet becomes uninhabitable (for example, the positions of those who believe that the increasing feasibility of abandoning Earth relieves pressure on humans to ensure sustainability of the planet and those who believe that humans nevertheless should continue to act sustainably).

Appendix 1 – Ethical concepts cards

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| truth | freedom |
| happiness | rights |
| equality | respect |
| harm | tolerance |
| responsibility | justice |
| fairness | care |

Appendix 2 – Ethical principles cards

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| People should be treated as ends not means. | Treat others as you would want to be treated. | Act justly. |
| Actions are right insofar as they promote happiness or pleasure and wrong insofar as they produce unhappiness or pain. | Act in a way that protects human rights. | Do not lie or steal. |
| Be generous, kind and charitable. | It is always important to obey authority. | It is not always important to obey authority. |
| It is acceptable to break an ethical duty as long as the person is not caught.  | It is acceptable to break an ethical duty as long as no rules or laws are broken. | It is acceptable to break an ethical duty as long as harm is minimised. |
| It is acceptable to break an ethical duty as long as it is culturally acceptable. | It is never acceptable to break an ethical duty. |  |