Background Reading:
Ethical Perspectives and Theories
How Does Ethics Differ from Morals and Values?

The terms values, morals, and ethics are often used interchangeably. However, there are some distinctions between these terms that are helpful to make.

- **Values** signify what is important and worthwhile. They serve as the basis for moral codes and ethical reflection. All individuals have their own values based on many aspects including: family, religion, peers, culture, race, social background, gender, etc. Values guide individuals, professions, communities, and institutions. One expression of values might be that 'Life is sacred.'

- **Morals** are codes of conduct governing behavior. They are an expression of values reflected in actions and practices. Morals can be held at an individual or communal level. For example, 'One should not kill' provides a guideline for action based upon values.

- **Ethics** provides a systematic, rational way to work through dilemmas and to determine the best course of action in the face of conflicting choices. Ethics attempts to find and describe what people believe is right and wrong, and to establish whether certain actions are actually right or wrong based on the all the information available. For example, ethics might address a question such as 'If killing is wrong, can one justify the death penalty or kill in self-defense?'

What Are Some Different Ethical Perspectives?

Ethicists defend their positions by using different ethical perspectives and theories. Five of the major perspectives are described here.

- **Moral Rules**
  An action is right if it follows certain fundamental moral rules. In Rules-based perspectives, the important feature is that an action itself should be considered, not what happens as a result of that action. This theory emphasizes moral duties and obligations as well as moral rights. Examples of commonly used rules are not to treat people as only a 'means to an end' and to 'treat others as you would like to be treated yourself'. Someone arguing from a rules-based perspective might say that his or her moral rule or duty is to 'always avoid killing'.

- **Virtues**
  An action is right if it conforms to a model set of attributes inherent in a particular community. Virtues-based ethics looks at the overall character that is considered desirable by a community. It then asks, 'what would the virtuous person do?' Ancient Greeks identified certain virtues that are

still widely recognized today as important such as compassion, honesty, courage, and forgiveness. Virtue ethics looks at the whole person and their behaviors over their lifetime in many situations. For example, killing may not be considered in harmony with a virtuous character that emphasizes forgiveness.

- ## Outcomes
  An action is right if good consequences outweigh bad consequences. Outcome-based approaches look at the results of actions in determining whether they are ethical or not. Often this theory will look for solutions that will create the greatest 'good' for the greatest number. For example, killing some people may be justified under this perspective if many more will be saved as a result.

- ## Principles
  An action is right if it follows the principles:

  Respect: Respect individuals and their autonomy (right to make independent choices).

  Beneficence: Be of benefit

  Non-maleficence: Minimize harm

  Justice: Treat others equitably, distribute benefits/burdens fairly

  The principles provide a combination of rules and outcomes-based perspectives. For example, respect for individuals and justice are focused more on rules, and beneficence and non-maleficence require looking at the outcome of an action. The principles are widely used in biomedical ethics. Suppose a person who was dying wished to be killed. The principle of autonomy might be interpreted to say that in order to respect that individual's wish, they should be killed. However, suppose the patient had asked a doctor to do the killing. A doctor who had vowed not to harm others might invoke the principle of non-maleficence and decide they could not kill the patient.

- ## Care
  An action is right if it acknowledges the importance and value of interpersonal relationships. Care ethics also looks at the underlying power structures of a situation. For example, an ethicist using the perspective of care might look at how an oppressive or exploitative social structure may underlie an act of killing.

Each of these perspectives allows different questions to be asked of an ethical dilemma. For example, in looking at different solutions one might ask, "Which one provides the greatest good for the greatest number?" "Which solutions are the most fair to the parties involved?", or "Which are consistent with moral rights and duties?" Familiarity with these perspectives can provide you with a language to describe and defend your position, and help you see how your arguments align with established philosophical perspectives.