

# Normative Uncertainty

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## Non-Normative Uncertainty & the Subjective 'Ought'

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that *Consequentialism* is true: you ought, morally, to perform the action that would, were you to perform it, result in the best complete world-history.

**The Mineshaft Example.** You know that 100 miners are all trapped in one of two mines — mine *A* or mine *B* — but you don't know which. You are equally confident in the two possibilities. Flood waters are rushing toward the mine shafts. There are three things you can do: (1) You can *block shaft A*, (2) you can *block shaft B*, or (3) you can *divert* the water between the two shafts. You know that, if the miners are in shaft *A*, blocking that shaft will save all their lives. Likewise, for shaft *B*. You also know that, if you divert the water, all but one of the miners will be saved. What should you do?

What you should *objectively* do depends on which shaft the miners are actually in: if they are in shaft *A*, you *objectively ought* to block shaft *A*; if they are in shaft *B*, you *objectively ought* to block shaft *B*.

You know that, if you *Divert*, you will *not* do what you objectively ought to do. But, because you are uncertain about where the miners are, you don't know what you objectively ought to do. So what should you do?

1. **(Belief)** You *subjectively* ought to do what you *believe* you objectively ought to do.

*Problem:* This is unhelpful because there might be no such option (as is the case in The Mineshaft Example).

2. **(Most Confident)** You *subjectively* ought to do what you are most confident is the objectively right thing to do.

*Problem:* This says that you subjectively shouldn't *divert* in The Mineshaft Example but, intuitively, that *is* what you subjectively ought to do.

3. **(MEV)** You *subjectively* ought to maximize expected moral value.

$$EMV(\phi) = \sum_S Cr(S | \phi) \cdot V(S \wedge \phi)$$

**Two Features of the Subjective 'Ought':** (1) It is *action-guiding*. (2) It tracks *praise-* and *blame-worthiness*.

**Main Question:** What ought you — a morally conscientious and minimally rational person — to do when you are uncertain about what you, morally, ought to do?

	IN SHAFT A	IN SHAFT B
<i>Block A</i>	100	0
<i>Block B</i>	0	100
<i>Divert</i>	99	99

Note: This is the *evidential* expected moral value of an option, but we could just as well look at an option's *causal* expected moral value. Which is correct? (*Bonus Question:* What should you do if you are uncertain about which decision theory — evidential or causal — is the correct one?)

Both of these features are related to the fact that the subjective 'ought' is only sensitive to what is *accessible* to you. What you subjectively ought to do supervenes on your perspective. (*Internalism vs Externalism*)

## Normative Uncertainty & the Subjective 'Ought'

You might not know what you, morally, ought to do because you are uncertain about how the world is (non-normatively): e.g., you don't know which shaft the miners are in, you don't know which medical treatment will be effective, you don't know whether clams feel pain, etc.

Alternatively, you might not know what you, morally, ought to do because you are uncertain about *morality*: e.g., you don't know whether Consequentialism or Deontology is true, you don't know whether Egalitarianism is true, you don't know whether it matters if clams can feel pain, etc.

**Moral Uncertainty:** You give positive credence to more than one moral theory.

What should you do when you don't know what to do because of *normative* uncertainty?

1. **My Favorite Theory:** "Do whatever the moral theory you're most confident in tells you to do."

*Problems:* (1) Violates a *Moral Dominance Principle* (it's definitely permissible to be a vegetarian and it might be deeply morally wrong not to, so you ought to be a vegetarian). (2) It depends on how moral theories are individuated. (3) If moral theories are individuated maximally finely, then, in many cases, what you ought to do will be something you are nearly certain is morally wrong.

2. **My Favorite Option:** "Do whatever it is that you're most confident is morally best."

*Problems:* (1) Violates *transitivity* (generates 'moral value pumps'). (2) Violates *the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives*. (3) Gives the intuitively incorrect result in Moral Versions of the Mineshaft Example.

3. **Maximize InterTheoretic Expected Value (MITE):** "Do whatever maximizes expected intertheoretic moral value."

$$EIMV(\phi) = \sum_i Cr(T_i) \cdot V_{T_i}(\phi)$$

*Problems:* (1) Too demanding? (Singer's Charity Example & Dominance). (2) *Fanaticism:* won't high-stakes moral theories completely swamp lower-stake moral theories? (Kantianism vs Consequentialism). (3) The Problem of Intertheoretic Value Comparisons.\*

\***The Problem of Intertheoretic Value Comparisons** can be broken down into two different problems:

- (a) *No Common Moral Currency.* Among moral theories that provide complete cardinal rankings of all options, there's no obvious way to *compare* these moral values *across* different moral theories. [Analogous to The Problem of Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility, but worse]
- (b) *Non-EVM-Representable Theories.* Not all moral theories provide complete cardinal rankings of your options. And it's not obvious that we can represent them in such a way as implicitly doing so.
  - i. *Supererogatory Actions.* Moral theories that allow for supererogation cannot be represented with a value-function because they violate the Completeness Axiom.
  - ii. *Absolutist Moral Theories.* Moral theories that say, e.g., "Never lie!" or "Never murder!" either violate the Continuity Axiom or (if we give that up) will assign infinite values that threaten to swamp our intertheoretic expected moral value calculations.