

Lynn, William S. 2007. Practical Ethics, in Bekoff, Mark, *Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relationships*, Westport: Greenwood Press, forthcoming.

Practical Ethics

Human-Animal Studies raises complex and often controversial questions about the ethics of humanity's relationship with other animals. These questions have implications for humanity's interaction with wild, companion, farm and research animals, as well as for how and why we study human-animal relations. One manner of addressing such issues is through practical ethics. Practical ethics generates a situated moral understanding that is well suited to grappling with the complexity and diversity of our responsibilities in a more-than-human world.

Ethics

Definitions of ethics can differ vastly. Most of these differences are rooted in attempts to explain ethics in terms of something else. For example, various academics have tried to associate ethical concerns with personal preferences, emotional responses, religious beliefs, social expectations and genetic determinism. Personality, empathy, spirituality, social custom and science may all enrich ethics at various points and times. Yet we should be careful not to let this obscure the meaning and importance of ethics itself.

To discover the meaning of ethics, we can look to Socrates, a Greek philosopher whose definition of ethics has been at the core of ethical thought for several thousand years. Socrates saw himself as a gadfly and midwife. As a gadfly he pushed people to think harder. As a midwife he helped them develop their thoughts to a higher level of rigour. For he and his followers, ethics was (and is) about 'how we ought to live' (from Plato's Republic, Book 2, 312d). What this brief statement means is this: ethics is about the moral values that inform (or should inform) our life. When we engage in ethics, we are not only exploring our ideas about what is good, right, just and valuable, we are also articulating principles of conduct based on these ideas. Overall, ethics helps us formulate rules-of-thumb that provides guidance as we strive for what the ancient Greeks termed *eudemonia*, what we now refer to as *flourishing*.

To help us flourish as both individuals and a community, ethical dialogue has two interrelated functions -- one of critique, and the other of vision. As part of the critique, we examine what promotes or detracts from the well-being of ourselves and others. In so doing, we identify how our worldviews, social institutions, decisions and actions affect our lives. As part of the vision, we consider how we might improve our individual and collective lives by proactively pressing for positive changes in states-of-affairs that are either wrong or in need of improvement. Because these functions are connected, ethics is not a static ideology of 'right versus wrong'. Instead, it is a living tradition of thought that, in light of reason and evidence, is continually revising and renewing itself.

Ethics is also a form of power. It is not a physical power like military force, rather it has the power of ideas. Ethics can reveal the moral issues at the heart of a situation. Once a problem is made visible through ethical reflection, it can then guide our responses in trying to resolve that problem. It also is an indispensable means of holding people and social systems accountable. Think of what it means to call someone 'a liar'. If the claim is accurate, and the lie has injured people, then an ethical judgment about the intentions behind the lie – as well as the actions because of the lie – has a moral power that is difficult to deny.

The power of ethical ideas is thereby indispensable in community life. It is an element of our social customs and laws, as moral norms help justify (and critique) our individual and collective beliefs and behaviour. It is also the inspiration for social movements seeking animal and environmental protection, as well as human rights and social justice. What is accepted or legal is not necessarily ethical, and social norms and laws that were once accepted have now been rejected (e.g. slavery) or are under attack (e.g. speciesism).

Finally, ethics is not only for human beings. People may be the only creatures on Earth who have abstract systems of thought labeled ethics. In this sense ethics is an artifact of human culture. This does not mean our ethical considerations must exclude other creatures. The moral community is a mixed one, populated by humans and other animals, all of whom share an intrinsic value and moral standing alongside the rest of nature. In addition, individuals and groups, ecosystems and societies represent different foci and scales of ethical reason. People, animals and nature all have a well-being that ethics helps us appreciate and protect.

Theoretically Rich and Empirically Situated

The world's moral complexity and the kind of ethical reasoning necessary to grapple with it was no secret to Socrates. He practiced a form of moral reasoning that was fully engaged with the empirical world, and differs markedly from the standard ways in which ethics is often practiced today.

In the standard model of ethics the right answer is determined ahead of time and derived without the benefit of what we might learn from experience. This is sometimes called 'theoretical' ethics. The answers from theoretical ethics are then applied to concrete cases in a top-down, linear and deductive manner. This is what is meant by 'applied ethics'.

Practical ethics proceeds differently. Instead of determining what the right answer must be ahead of time, practical ethics seeks out the best answer by integrating what we learn from a concrete case about a moral problem and the conceptual insights that help us best understand and resolve that moral problem. It is for this reason that practical ethics rejects easy division between theoretical versus applied ethics. Rather it seeks a situated moral understanding -- an ethics that is simultaneously conceptually rich and situated in real life. Practical ethics looks to diverse moral principles, rooted in the empirical reality of cases, to triangulate on the reasons and resolutions to our moral concerns.

Several features about practical ethics should be emphasized here.

Pluralism. For the practical ethicist, moral concepts are plural and complementary. The more concepts we have, the deeper our reservoir of potential insights. Thus the practical ethicist is not precommitted to a single concept that she uses over and over in all situations. She is free to choose from a constellation of concepts. Ideally, her choice reflects those concepts that are most useful in resolving a moral problem. Moral concepts that are commonly used in practical ethics are recognized by such terms as good, right, fair, just and value.

Triangulation. Ethical concepts cannot be applied by rote, like a grid of latitude and longitude from which we read off the correct moral 'position'. Rather, moral understanding is akin to triangulating on the best ethical position. When triangulating over land or sea, one needs several reference points to properly plot your position. These reference points may be stars (e.g. Polaris the North Star) or

landmarks (e.g. mountain peaks). The same is true in ethics, where the reference points are well developed moral concepts. To triangulate, one needs a plurality of these concepts to find one's way in the moral landscape.

Principles and Maxims. Moral concepts can be used as either principles or maxims. A principle is a moral concept used to clarify out thinking. It provides guidance to our reasoning about how we ought to live. The concepts of human rights or the intrinsic value of animals are examples of such principles. A maxim is a moral concept used to clarify our actions. Maxims provide more focused guidance than principles, and are especially directed towards what we ought to do, that is, what actions we should undertake. The golden rule (treat others as you would want to be treated) is an example of a maxim. Overall, principles justify the use of certain maxims that guide our action, while maxims align our actions with broader moral concepts.

Rules of Thumb. Moral concepts are not rigid or absolute laws. They are rules-of-thumb that help us locate better from worse ways of thinking and acting. Both principles and maxims actively and dynamically reveal the ethical issues at stake, and provide guidance on what we ought to do about them. They do not, however, make moral decisions for us. Rather they are the tools through which we exercise moral judgment.

Praxis. The term praxis refers to putting theory into action. Praxis is not a one-way relation where one deductively reasons from theory to action. It is a two-way relation where theory and action are reciprocally informing. In practical ethics, the principles and maxims we use to reveal ethical issues and guide our subsequent actions are selected in light of the case at hand. It is a form of practical reasoning where theory and reality is not disengaged from each other, and ethics can be situated in the world.

Context. Concrete moral problems are situated in space, time, nature and culture. All ethical issues therefore have a geographical, historical, environmental and cultural context. The stock of moral concepts in use and the actions that a moral agent can take are enabled and constrained by the context in which one operates. These are the sites and situations in which moral problems, the controversies that swirl around them, and their possible resolutions exist. In this sense, questions about both ethical theory and practice are eventually always situated in the world.

Judgment. The proper matching of principles, maxims and cases takes experience and skill, a feature that practical ethicists refer to as judgment. Having good judgment means one can correctly match the most appropriate moral concepts to the case at hand. This is best done when we balance the facts on the ground with our best ethical understanding and chart a course of action from there. Ethical reasoning is always a matter of making our best interpretation of events.

Truth. From the standpoint of practical ethics, there is rarely a single, indisputable judgment that is right (or wrong). Reasonable people will differ on what the best concepts (principles and/or maxims) for understanding a particular case might be. They may also differ on what a reasonable course of action might entail. Recognizing that absolute truth (veracity) is rarely possible, practical ethics seeks the best account of truth that is possible (verisimilitude).

Situated. The recognition that absolute moral truth is very difficult to come by is not a reason to endorse ethical relativism. With its emphasis on praxis and context, practical ethics is not only situated in the world, but takes the creative middle ground and situates itself between absolutist and

relativist interpretations of ethics. It does so believing we can distinguish better from worse moral reasoning or courses of action. We do so in light of the evidence at hand, and the rigour of our thinking. Akin to the evolution of scientific knowledge, both reason and evidence are tested through dialogue with one another, and in light of our experience over time. By fusing our conceptual horizons of moral understanding, this allows each of us to come to a deeper and better understanding of a moral problem and its possible resolution(s).

Examples of Principles and Maxims

Below are a few examples of principles, maxims and how they might apply to concrete cases. A complete discussion of the history, philosophy and use of practical ethics is beyond the scope of this entry. Nonetheless, these examples should give a flavour of the practical ethics approach. These examples are not meant to be conclusive. Rather they are suggestive of how a practical ethics about non-human animals works. Moreover, there is not a hard and fast line to be drawn between using a moral concept as a principle or a maxim. In general, principles are more abstract and thought-oriented, while maxims are more concrete and action-oriented.

Principles (guidelines for thought)

Geocentrism -- We should acknowledge the moral value and standing of people, animals and nature. This principle values animals and their habitats, while encouraging recognition of humanity's membership in a wider moral community. Geocentrism incorporates the insights of anthropocentrism (the moral value of people and their communities), biocentrism (the moral value of individual people and animals) and ecocentrism (the moral value of biodiversity and ecosystems). Significantly, it helps us sidestep the pitfalls and arguments between the latter three viewpoints.

Equal Consideration -- We should give equal consideration to the well-being of people, animals and nature. This is an adaptation of Peter Singer's principle by the same name. This principle helps us actualize geocentrism by identifying and balancing our responsibilities to people, animals and their mutual habitats. Note that equal consideration does not imply equal treatment. When creatures differ in their capacities and modes of life (e.g. people, foxes, voles), then equal consideration requires appropriate differences of treatment.

Hard Cases -- When faced with a situation pitting humans against animals, first solve the underlying problem, then look for alternatives, and as a last resort, chose a geographic compromise that protects the entire community's well-being. This principle helps us think through the complications raised when we give equal consideration to the well-being of human and non-human others. Our universal need for geographic 'space' -- habitat, resources, etc. -- makes win/lose conflicts a fact of life. We should first seek to resolve the underlying conflict and prevent its recurrence. If we cannot do this, then we should seek alternative modalities that protect the well-being of people and animals, both as individuals and as populations. If this is not possible (and sometimes it is not) then we need to optimize our land-use and planning so that some kinds of human life can flourish in one area, while other kinds of non-human life can flourish in another area.

Moral Carrying Capacity -- People should live within an overall carrying capacity that protects the well-being of non-human individuals, biodiversity and landscapes. This principle is crucial as it helps us avoid the hard cases mentioned above. While technology and social organization may mitigate the upper limit on the earth's carrying capacity for humans, there is a definite and negative impact of societal growth and consumption on the non-human world. Humans must take responsibility for

limiting their use of the earth's carrying capacity. This is no where more true than in urban areas where, with globalization, the entire world has become a hinterland -- a pool of resources for urban life. Part of this will involve making geographic compromises by protecting adequate habitat for non-human life both within and outside the urban environment.

Precaution – The idea behind precaution is similar to the medical principle, 'first do no harm'. The concept is a principle for dealing with the uncertainty that pervades both questions of ethics and science. Precaution states that a lack of certainty is not an excuse for actions that may create harm or are irreversible. In the face of uncertainty, precautions should be taken to minimize the risks to people, animals and the rest of nature. Of central importance here is that the burden of justification for actions causing suffering or harm lies with the advocate(s) of an action. One has no inviolable right to engage in activities with risk of harm (e.g. polluting a water source) simply because the range and extent of that harm is not yet well-documented.

Maxims (guidelines for action)

Integrity -- We should endeavour to respect the psychological, physical and social integrity of wild and domestic animals by minimizing stress, using non-invasive and non-lethal techniques in cases of conflict, and avoiding the disruption of social organization and ecological relationships.

Graduated Response – In cases of human-animal conflict, there are a continuum of responses, from non-destructive and non-lethal through destructive and lethal. We should seek to resolve a problem with non-destructive and non-lethal responses first. Where one starts on this continuum depends on the severity of the problem.

Harm-Benefit Ratios -- During the design phase of research, policy or management strategies regarding non-human animals, we should calculate harm-benefit ratios for each action. Such ratios help us explore whether the probable benefits to science, society or nature can outweigh the foreseeable harms to wildlife and their habitats.

Mutual Benefits -- Whenever possible, we should adopt those actions that provide mutual benefits for people, animals and nature. Vague assertions about human benefits or risks to public health are rarely sufficient reasons to sacrifice the well-being of animals. This is a more positive and proactive principle than the harm-benefit ratios mentioned above.

Reduction, Refinement, Replacement (the 3Rs) -- When using invasive or harmful procedures in the laboratory or the field, we should practice the three 'Rs' --reduction of their number of actions, refinements in their technique, and replacement with non-invasive and non-harmful procedures. This principle promotes best practices by mandating that we 1) impact the fewest number of animals, 2) cause the least amount of physical or psychological harm, 3) minimize the harassment of animals or populations, and 4) maximize the number of alternatives to the direct use or control of other creatures.

End-Points – Invasive or harmful actions should specify humane 'end-points' so that if an action proves harmful, we know when to stop. When an action based on a policy or management strategy is proving harmful, it should have a pre-defined endpoint. After the action is brought to a halt, the situation should be reassessed to produce a better course of action.

Conclusion

In modern times, variations on the practical approach to ethics have been advocated by Anna Peterson, Anthony Weston, Arne Naess, Georg Hans Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Dale Jamieson and Stephen Toulmin. It was Mary Midgley, however, who set the tone early on in animal ethics as well as human-animal studies (a discipline which might also be dated to her early publications). In her book *Animals and Why They Matter* (1984), Midgley carefully explores the dominant theories of animal ethics. She does so as part of an appreciative critique, seeking out conceptual insights, while noting short-comings when a theory or concept is misapplied. She does not ask her readers to choose another theory per se, but to appreciate and carefully use the full range of concepts that are made available through a diversity of theories. In other words, she asks that we generate a situated moral understanding, one that takes both moral concepts and the facts on the ground as equally important and mutually informing.

Unfortunately, it is not a simple task to put practical ethics to work. The world is ethically fraught and dynamic. The unparalleled power of humans to do good or ill in the world means that no narrow set of rules can hope to represent our moral concerns, much less give adequate guidance beyond basic prohibitions against egregious wrong-doing. So there is no ethical rule-book we can follow to give us certain answers. No theory, method or concept on its own, is adequate to the task.

Nevertheless, this does not mean we lack the ability to clarify and state our ethical responsibilities. We have access to a constellation of moral concepts that we can use as principles and maxims to triangulate on better (versus worse) accounts of how we ought to live. There may be no God-given, scientifically proven, absolute moral truths to set our sights upon, but we can adjust our moral compass for guidance in how we improve or detract from the well-being of ourselves and others. That is the task of practical ethics.

See also Ethics
 Ethics and Wolves
 Human-Animal Studies
 Animals and Public Policy

Further Resources

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1993. *Truth and Method*. Second, Revised ed. New York: Continuum.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1993. *Justification and Application: Remarks On Discourse Ethics*. Translated by Cronin, C. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jamieson, D. 2002. *Morality's Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals and the Rest of Nature*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Lynn, W. S. 2004. The Quality of Ethics: Moral Causation in the Interdisciplinary Science of Geography. Pages 231-244 in R. Lee, and D. M. Smith, editors. *Geographies and Moralities: International Perspectives on Justice, Development and Place*. Routledge, London.

Lynn, W. S. 2006. Between Science and Ethics: What Science and the Scientific Method Can and Cannot Contribute to Conservation and Sustainability. Pages 191-205 in D. Lavigne, editor.

Practical Ethics

Gaining Ground: In Pursuit of Ecological Sustainability. University of Limerick, Limerick, IRL.

Midgley, M. 1998. *Animals and Why They Matter*. University of Georgia Press, Athens.

Midgley, M. 2005. *The Essential Mary Midgley*. Routledge, New York.

Naess, A. 1989. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Peterson, A. L. 2001. *Being Human: Ethics, Environment and Our Place in the World*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Rolston, H., III 1994. *Conserving Natural Value*. Columbia University Press, New York.

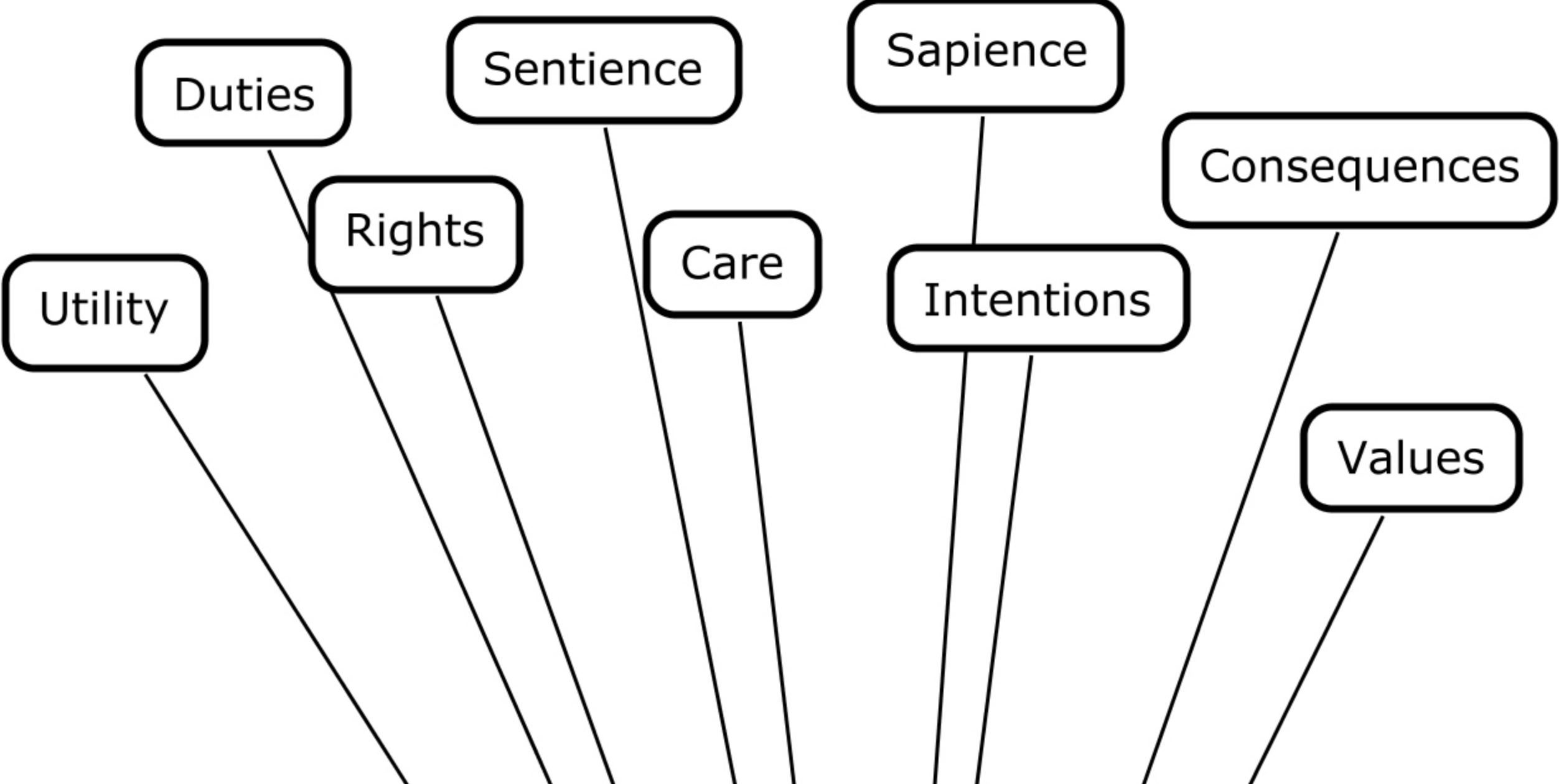
Singer, P. 1979. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Toulmin, S., and A. R. Jonsen 1988. *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Weston, A. 2006. *A Practical Companion to Ethics*. Oxford University Press, New York.

William S. Lynn

'Constellation' of Moral Concepts
A reservoir of ethical insights. Using multiple insights helps one 'triangulate' on the best interpretation.



Practical Reasoning
Practical Reasoning organizes moral concepts into:
1. **Principles** (rules of thumb for ethical reasoning)
2. **Maxims** (rules of thumb for ethical action)

Praxis
Theory and action are mutually informing.

Concrete Moral Problem

Context
Concrete moral problems are situated in space, time, nature and culture, i.e. a context.

Range of Ethically Motivated Action

Situated Moral Understanding (SMU)
A situated moral understanding is achieved when moral concepts, appropriately organized through practical reasoning, provide insight into one or more concrete moral problems, and guidance for ethically motivated action.