ETHICAL THEORY GRID · SAMPLE 1

The Diary and the Birthday Present

Columns = theories. Rows = pro and con.
Pick the strongest box against you as your counterargument.

THE CASE

Your girlfriend's birthday is coming up and you have no idea what to get her. She writes in her diary every day, and you are fairly sure she has written down what she wants. The diary is sitting on her desk.

THE QUESTION

Should you read her diary to find a birthday present idea?

	Utilitarianism Consequentialism *Which choice creates the most happiness and least suffering overall?*	Deontology from Greek *deon* = duty *Which duties, rules or rights hold, whatever the consequences?*	Virtue Ethics Aristotle; aims at *eudaimonia* = flourishing *What would a person of good character do?*	Care Ethics optional 4th column *What do the relationships and the vulnerable people here need?*
PRO Yes, read it	The goal is a happy girlfriend and a great birthday. If she never finds out, she gets the perfect gift, nobody is hurt, and net utility goes up.	This is the weakest box, and that is useful to know. You could argue you are acting from a duty of kindness to your partner, and a quick look for her own benefit is not the kind of intrusion the right to privacy is meant to stop.	A thoughtful, generous partner goes out of their way to find a gift that shows they really know the other person. Wanting to get it right shows care.	Care ethics looks at the relationship. Wanting to meet her needs and make her feel truly known is a caring motive.
CON No, don't	If she finds out, the hurt and broken trust far outweigh one good present, and you may feel guilty too. Simply asking her, or a friend, gets a good gift with none of that risk.	Reading it violates her right to privacy, whatever the happiness outcome. A diary is written for herself alone, and good intentions do not give you permission to cross that line.	Secretly reading someone's diary is not what an honest, trustworthy person does. The golden mean here is being attentive and asking, not snooping.	A caring relationship rests on trust, including respect for the parts of her life she keeps to herself. Listening to her protects the relationship better.

STRONGEST COUNTERARGUMENT If your thesis is **"No, don't read it"**, the strongest box against you is **Utilitarianism / Pro**: if she never finds out, nobody is hurt. Discharge it: you can never guarantee she won't find out, and asking her gets the same gift with no risk.

From Video 1: Introduction to Ethical Theories.

ETHICAL THEORY GRID · SAMPLE 2

Cara and the Invasive Green Crabs

Columns = theories. Rows = pro and con.
Pick the strongest box against you as your counterargument.

THE CASE

Cara, 14, wants to turn invasive European green crabs into organic fertilizer, a natural alternative to chemical fertilizers. The crabs eat clams, mussels, oysters and baby lobsters and destroy eelgrass beds, and one female can produce up to 4.7 million offspring. The proven humane method, a Crustastun electrical stunner, costs about $3,500; Cara has $50, so she plans to freeze them instead.

THE QUESTION

Should Cara freeze the crabs for fertilizer without the humane stunner?

	Utilitarianism Consequentialism *Which choice creates the most happiness and least suffering overall?*	**Deontology** from Greek *deon* = duty *Which duties, rules or rights hold, whatever the consequences?*	**Virtue Ethics** Aristotle; aims at *eudaimonia* = flourishing *What would a person of good character do?*	**Care Ethics** optional 4th column *What do the relationships and the vulnerable people here need?*
PRO Yes, freeze them	Removing the crabs protects shellfish, eelgrass and the people who fish them, and replaces chemical fertilizer. As in the trolley problem, harm to some crabs saves far more creatures, and sales could fund the stunner later.	We have a duty to protect the ecosystem and the people whose livelihoods depend on it. Culling an invasive pest breaks no law and violates no human right.	Cara shows initiative and responsibility: she is tackling a real environmental harm with what she has, instead of doing nothing.	Care for the wider community: the fishers, farmers and native species who are vulnerable to the invasion and cannot fix it themselves.
CON No, not yet	Crabs very likely feel pain, since pain helps animals escape danger. Freezing thousands of them adds up to a lot of suffering, and doing it may distress Cara and her helpers.	There is a duty not to cause unnecessary suffering to animals. When a humane method exists, choosing a crueller one to save money crosses that line, whatever the benefit.	A compassionate person does not accept avoidable cruelty for convenience. The golden mean: help the ecosystem, but first find a sponsor or partner to pay for the stunner.	The crabs are the most vulnerable party here and cannot protect themselves. A caring plan looks for every way to reduce their suffering before going ahead.

STRONGEST COUNTERARGUMENT If your thesis is **"Yes, freeze them"** (a utilitarian case), the strongest box against you is **Deontology / Con**: unnecessary suffering. Discharge it: the suffering is not unnecessary if the stunner is out of reach and doing nothing lets the damage spread; Cara can switch to the stunner once sales allow.

Case taught in MPI Ethics Olympiad coaching, November 2026.

ETHICAL THEORY GRID · SAMPLE 3

Life Online

Columns = theories. Rows = pro and con.
Pick the strongest box against you as your counterargument.

THE CASE

A company builds a fully immersive virtual reality game, Life Online, in which dying in the game means dying in real life. Playing is voluntary: players are clearly told the risks and must confirm several times before raising the danger level. Some compare it to skydiving or boxing; others say it is different, because anyone can risk their life from their living room with no training.

THE QUESTION

Is it ethical to play Life Online on the hardest setting, where you may die?

	Utilitarianism Consequentialism *Which choice creates the most happiness and least suffering overall?*	**Deontology** from Greek *deon* = duty *Which duties, rules or rights hold, whatever the consequences?*	**Virtue Ethics** Aristotle; aims at *eudaimonia* = flourishing *What would a person of good character do?*	**Care Ethics** optional 4th column *What do the relationships and the vulnerable people here need?*
PRO Yes, it can be	Players get huge enjoyment, freedom and meaning from the game, and most will survive. Banning it removes all that happiness to prevent a risk people knowingly chose.	Competent adults have a right to bodily autonomy, including the right to take informed risks with their own lives. Full disclosure and repeated consent respect that right, just as we do for extreme sports.	Courage and adventurousness are virtues. Testing yourself against real danger can build character, as climbers and boxers often say.	Caring for someone includes respecting their own choices about how to live. Many people who love risk-takers support them rather than control them.
CON No, it isn't	Every death brings grief to families and costs to health services. People in crisis could use the game as an easy way to end their lives, and children might get access to it.	There may be a duty not to throw your own life away for entertainment. And consent may not be fully real when a life-or-death choice takes seconds from your sofa.	Risking death for a game looks like rashness, the vice of excess next to courage. Courage means facing danger for something worth it, not for fun.	Your life is bound up with the people who depend on you. Choosing a needless risk of death ignores the family and friends who would be left behind.

STRONGEST COUNTERARGUMENT If your thesis is **"Yes, it can be ethical"** (a rights and autonomy case), the strongest box against you is **Utilitarianism / Con**: people in crisis and children. Discharge it: age checks and crisis screening, plus Mill's harm principle (*On Liberty*): society may stop you harming others, not yourself.

Case: Life Online, TKEthics Fall 2026 case set (Case 1).

ETHICAL THEORY GRID · SAMPLE 4

Hooked by Design: Social Media on Trial

Columns = theories. Rows = pro and con.
Pick the strongest box against you as your counterargument.

THE CASE

A young woman sued Meta, YouTube and other platforms, arguing that features like infinite scroll, autoplay, algorithmic feeds and push notifications were designed to be addictive and harmed her mental health from childhood. A jury found Meta and YouTube liable, after internal documents suggested they knew about harms to young users. The companies argued the science is unsettled and that her family situation and her parents' choices were to blame.

THE QUESTION

Is it the companies' responsibility to reduce harm to their users, or is it up to users and their parents?

	Utilitarianism Consequentialism *Which choice creates the most happiness and least suffering overall?*	Deontology from Greek *deon* = duty *Which duties, rules or rights hold, whatever the consequences?*	Virtue Ethics Aristotle; aims at *eudaimonia* = flourishing *What would a person of good character do?*	Care Ethics optional 4th column *What do the relationships and the vulnerable people here need?*
PRO Companies are responsible	Billions of young people use these apps, so even small design changes, like no autoplay for children, could prevent a huge amount of anxiety and depression. The companies are best placed to make them.	If you know your product harms children, you have a duty to act, not to keep profiting from it. Tobacco companies that hid cancer research are the classic example.	A good company, like a good person, shows honesty and responsibility. Hiding what you know about harm to children is a vice, whatever the law says.	Children are the most vulnerable party and the companies hold the power. Those with power over the vulnerable owe them protection.
CON Users and parents are	Platforms create real value: friendship, creativity and information. Heavy rules could cut those benefits for everyone, while parents and governments can target the harm more precisely.	Companies owe a duty to shareholders to run a profitable business, and users have the right to make their own choices. Preventing harm to children falls to parents and government.	Self-control is a virtue we should build in ourselves and our children. Blaming the app can let users and parents off the hook for developing it.	The closest caring relationship is between parent and child. Parents know their own children's needs and are best placed to set limits.

STRONGEST COUNTERARGUMENT If your thesis is **"Companies are responsible"**, the strongest box against you is **Deontology / Con**: companies owe profit to shareholders, and harm prevention falls to government and parents. Discharge it: responsibility can be shared, and harming children loses users and profit in the long run. Even if profit matters, the tobacco example shows it never excuses hiding harm.

Case: Hooked by Design, TKEthics Fall 2026 case set (Case 6).

BLANK TEMPLATE

Ethical Theory Grid

Columns = theories. Rows = pro and con.
Fill each box with 1 to 3 plain sentences.

THE CASE

THE QUESTION

	Utilitarianism Consequentialism *Which choice creates the most happiness and least suffering overall?*	Deontology from Greek *deon* = duty *Which duties, rules or rights hold, whatever the consequences?*	Virtue Ethics Aristotle; aims at *eudaimonia* = flourishing *What would a person of good character do?*	Care Ethics optional 4th column *What do the relationships and the vulnerable people here need?*
PRO Side A	*What outcome does this produce for everyone affected? Who gains, and how much?*	*Which duty or right is at stake, and does it support this side?*	*What would a person of good character do? Which virtue does this side show?*	*Who is vulnerable here, and what do they need? How does this side meet it?*
CON Side B	*What harms or suffering follow? Is there a better option with a higher net result?*	*Which duty or right would be violated? Does it hold even if the outcome is good?*	*Which vice could this show? Where is the golden mean between the extremes?*	*Whose trust or relationship could be damaged? Who is left without care?*

STRONGEST COUNTERARGUMENT *Which box most strongly opposes your thesis? Name it, state it fairly, then plan your discharge (your answer to it).*

Care Ethics is optional: cross it out if you use three theories.