

# We are What We Decide: A Stephen Toulmin-Based Moral Decision-Making Model

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**ABSTRACT---** *The ethical life, well lived, presents a bewildering array of challenges. At stake are issues of love and hate, justice and injustice, reward and renunciation, fairness and favoritism, prudence and negligence, kinship and community, kindness and cruelty, self-interest and empathy, virtue and immorality, belief and doubt, hope and despair, courage and cowardice, righteousness and roguishness—and so much more. Simply put, our moral lives are complex affairs, with multiple conditions influencing every move we make.*

*Making optimal moral decisions in such dauntingly complex, supremely sensitive conditions presents one of the great trials in human life. With this complexity and sensitivity in mind that I will propose in this paper a moral decision making model with the aim of providing clarity in our moral lives. This model is based on Stephen Toulmin's argumentation model, elucidated in his *The Uses of Argument* (1958). Toulmin's model is elegant, robust, imminently pragmatic, and incorporates virtually all of the constituents necessary for rational and constructive debate. The linguistic concepts of modality and important deontological concepts will be incorporated within this model, and additional explanations, definitions, analyses and personal reflections with the aim of fleshing out and sharpening several key conceptions will be provided.*

**Keywords----** ethics, morality, virtue ethics, deontology, Toulmin decision-making model, modality, improvisational ethics, justificatory ethics, moral absolutes

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*Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences.*  
Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As we humans make our way in our lives, with most of us feeling an innate responsibility to contribute constructively and beneficently to the human endeavor, we face what can be a bewildering array of moral and ethical challenges stemming from experiences of love and hate, justice and injustice, reward and renunciation, fairness and favoritism, prudence and negligence, kinship and community, kindness and cruelty, self-interest and empathy, virtue and immorality, belief and doubt, hope and despair, courage and cowardice, righteousness and roguishness—and so much more. Simply put, our moral lives are complex affairs, with multiple conditions influencing every move we make. Owen Flanagan recognizes this complexity and the emotional and intellectual demands we confront when he writes, "[w]hat is relevant to ethical reflection is everything we know, everything we can bring to ethical conversation that merits attention: data from the human sciences, history, literature and the other arts, from playing with possible worlds in imagination, and from everyday commentary on everyday events" (35). (Flanagan is currently James B. Duke Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Neurobiology at Duke University.)

Everything we know, indeed. Making optimal moral decisions in such dauntingly complex, supremely sensitive conditions presents one of the great trials in human life, and it is with this complexity and sensitivity in mind that I will propose in this paper a moral decision-making model that will provide clarity as we make our way through this tangle, this dense jungle, this teeming ecology, of our moral lives. This model is based on Stephen Toulmin's argumentation model, elucidated in his *The Uses of Argument* (1958). Toulmin's model is elegant, robust, imminently pragmatic (most would simply aver that it is "common sense"), and incorporates virtually all of the constituents necessary for rational and constructive debate. In short, the model is essentially complete, and it is hoped aggregate and useful. My approach will be to provide explanations, definitions, analyses and occasional personal reflections with the aim of fleshing out and sharpening several key conceptions of the model, which overall it is hoped will better accord within a moral decision-making paradigm (Toulmin's original design is primarily rhetorical). This paper is brief, and my aims are modest. I will not examine all of the philosophical and rhetorical factors in great detail, assumptions about certain concepts will be made, and the benefit of the doubt will be granted in some instances.

## 2. THE SHAPE OF OUR MORAL DECISIONS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MODALITY

Anthony Cunningham has recognized the fecundity of moral life and proposed an “improvisational” approach (2) to moral decision-making that takes into account “particular people leading particular lives” (3). We need most importantly, Cunningham writes, to incorporate our “intimate bonds” (passim) of kinship and community into answering ethical questions, and “emotions are at the heart of our ethical commitments” (65). In short, Cunningham dismisses many universalizing, doctrinaire philosophical approach, because “moral values are a diverse lot without some fundamental essence” (70). In his analysis Cunningham aims to deconstruct “totalizing” philosophies (he focuses on Kant), which he believes lack complete context based on the authentic particulars of human experience. Toulmin would no doubt applaud Cunningham’s effort, as he has himself decried the conflict between humanistic and rational approaches in philosophical enquiry, with the former constructively focused on “the accumulation of concrete details of practical experience” and the latter abstractedly centered on “the analysis of an abstract core of theoretical concepts” (both *Cosmopolis* 43). (Cunningham is professor of philosophy at St. John’s University.)

Broadly I agree with Cunningham, but find that his conception of a “larger narrative picture” (75) of moral decision-making (with his endorsement of literature as a “moral filter” [92] and potential guide in such efforts) too open-ended to provide genuinely useful guidance. In short, the interrelated conditions and modalities of our “moral ecology” (as Bellah et al. term it [335]), are more textured even than the lengthy list of nouns provided in the introduction of this paper. While nodding toward its inherent variety and interrelatedness, to look at the challenge of moral decision-making solely through Cunningham’s lens could be to miss the forest through the trees. The more accurate but embracing understanding of our topic stems from the term referred to in the subtitle to this section—modality. Why modality, in terms of moral choice? The answer to this question is in fact straightforward, for the very fulcrums on which moral choices as we understand them are situated on grammatical modals: should, ought to, must, have to, could, might, shall, will, etc. These potent verbal forms constitute the very essence and the most important structural attributes of moral decision-making. According to Merriam-Webster’s, modality by definition conveys conceptions of “possibility, impossibility, contingency, or necessity” (747). This succinctly points to the essential conditions and factors surrounding moral choice: “What can we do? What should we choose? What is possible? What is necessary? What contingent factors should be considered?” Flanagan comprehends the importance of these contingent and possible factors when he writes, first simply that, “[m]oral issues are heterogeneous in kind” (30), and then more detailedly that, “[a]ttunement to contingency, plural values, and the vast array of possible human personalities opens the way for use of important and underutilized human capacities: capacities for critical reflection, seeking deep understanding of alternative ways of being and living, and deploying our agentic capacities to modify our selves, engage in identity experimentation, and meaning location within the vast space of possibilities that have been and are being tried by our fellows.” (43)

In addition to the above, modals indicate “predication of an action or state in some manner other than as a simple fact” (Merriam Webster 747). The complexity of our understanding is deepening, for this definition’s referral to predication indicates the importance of logical affirmation, the assignment of elements in classes, and the designation of properties or relations—all mirroring the complexity of moral decision-making, at once diffuse and ordered, at large and hierarchical, and always suffused with agency. Predication is, further, “the part of a sentence or clause that expresses what is said of the subject.” Let us alter this definition ever so slightly, and insert the word “about” for “of,” in order to read: “the part of a sentence or clause that expresses what is said about the subject.” By doing this we are thrust into a Husserl-esque environment of intentionality that provides yet more context to moral conditions and decisions, and yet more deeply incorporates human interpretation, input, relations and intercourse into our understanding of modality.<sup>1</sup>

The meaning and importance that emerge from moral decision-making stem from (and constitute) a contingent, flexible world of multiple possibilities, suffused with human intervention. Seen this way, no totalizing “ism,” no magic bullet, no “key” (“skeleton key” I should say) will provide humans with a one-size-fits-all tool for analyzing morality and realizing useful moral outcomes. That said, Immanuel Kant may have had (note the modal qualification) one thing right: we need a structure of decision-making to help us manage the moral challenges and opportunities we find ourselves arbitrating. Additionally, however, I posit that we need a foundation of first-order principles to direct us, to serve as guides deeply emplaced in human experience. In short, we need a decision-making model that allows for a variety of necessary

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<sup>1</sup> The foregoing indicates that I reject a simplistic “ought vs. is” approach to ethics, and I’m afraid I disagree with David Hume, and believe that his *ought* and *ought not* are decidedly not “some new relation or affirmation” (Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, in Appiah 182) in human experience. Such modality is, rather, virtually *organic* to human existence. To claim that modality is somehow disconnected from the “is” of human life strikes me as close to absurd. On the one hand, we will always base our moral decisions on given experience and evidence—life’s *is-ness*—and it is my position that the moral principles crafted by humans are, essentially, supervenient on these factors. To add to this understanding, if perhaps a bit further afield, consider a model of consciousness such as David Chalmers’s, in which “structure[s] of difference relations” (broadly, *modality*) function within an overarching ecology of information (to repeat, broadly, life’s *is-ness*). Here again we see a model in which morality’s *oughts* and human life’s *is-ness* are in accord (see Chalmers, “Facing up to the problem of consciousness”).

inputs both “relative” and “absolute,” which is simple, clear, adaptable and dependable. With Stephen Toulmin as our guide, to such a model we now turn.

### 3. A TOULMIN-BASED MORAL DECISION MAKING MODEL

Readers will intuit that a pragmatic decision-making model goes against the grain of straightforward virtue ethics—a belief that moral life and virtuous behavior are “center[ed] in the heart and personality of the agent” (Pojman 388). In this view, moral behavior is not what sort of action to do (what sort of decision to make, we might say in the context of our discussion), but what sort of person to be. While I find such beliefs appealing and credible, for the time being I must depart from them. My reasoning for this is as follows (and see again note 1): To separate what we “are” from what we “do” is by definition impossible, or perhaps at best a “chicken and the egg” problem. My actions (what I do) can, must, and will, stem from what I am (what I believe might be another way to put it). Conversely, what I am, can, must, and will dictate what I do.<sup>2</sup> I cannot routinely do things that are different from what I am, and I cannot routinely be things that are different from what I do (if I did I would be a walking contradiction). If I am a democrat, then working forward from what I am (my belief), you can be pretty sure of what I will do—that is, not suddenly vote for a communist candidate. And if I give most of the homeless people I see on the street a dollar or two and say a kind word as I pass, then, working backwards from what I do, you can be sure of what I am—a generous, kind person.<sup>3</sup> Instances of pragmatic self-promotion or deceitful self-interest may on occasion modify this understanding, but will not wholly alter it.

To repeat and to rephrase the title of this paper, we are what we do, and combined with a straightforward or intuitive understanding of what a decision entails, I believe that an effective moral decision-making model will evince a pragmatic process that incorporates multiple important elements and data stemming from personal and community experience and belief. Toulmin believed that formal (primarily inferential Aristotelian) logic as a decision-making model was too esoteric, aridly theoretical, inflexible to the point of absurdity and largely useless in real life.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, universalizing “all”-based premises (all men are mortal; Socrates is a man; etc.) “land us in a paradox,” writes Toulmin (*Uses* 118), and he continues, “...much of moral theory is concerned with getting us out this morass. Few people insist on trying to put into practice the consequences of insisting on the extra ‘all’, for to do so one must resort to desperate measures...adopting an eccentric moral position...in which one principle and one alone is admitted to be genuinely universal, and this principle is defended through thick and thin, in the face of all the conflicts and counter-claims which would normally qualify its application. (*Uses* 118)

Moving away from a principally “inferential function” founded on narrow statements presented in restrictive form, Toulmin focuses on the “justificatory function” (*Uses* 12 and *passim*) of argumentation (in our discussion, “decision-making”), and sees logic as no less than a “generalised jurisprudence” (*Uses* 7). Whereas theoretical arguments make inferences based on a set of principles to arrive at a claim (Kant’s categorical imperative could be viewed this way, as could straightforward deontology or utilitarianism), justificatory arguments find a claim of interest, and then provide validation by way of the constituents of Toulmin’s model: grounds, data, backing and warrant leading to claim, modified by qualifications and the hearing of rebuttals.<sup>5</sup> Such an accommodating model will be able to handle Flanagan’s “everything we know, everything we can bring to ethical conversation” (35), and with this understanding in mind, I reproduce below Toulmin’s argumentation model, with connecting logical operators. In the section following I shall examine various of the model’s fields and terminology, and relate them to my own conception of moral decision-making.

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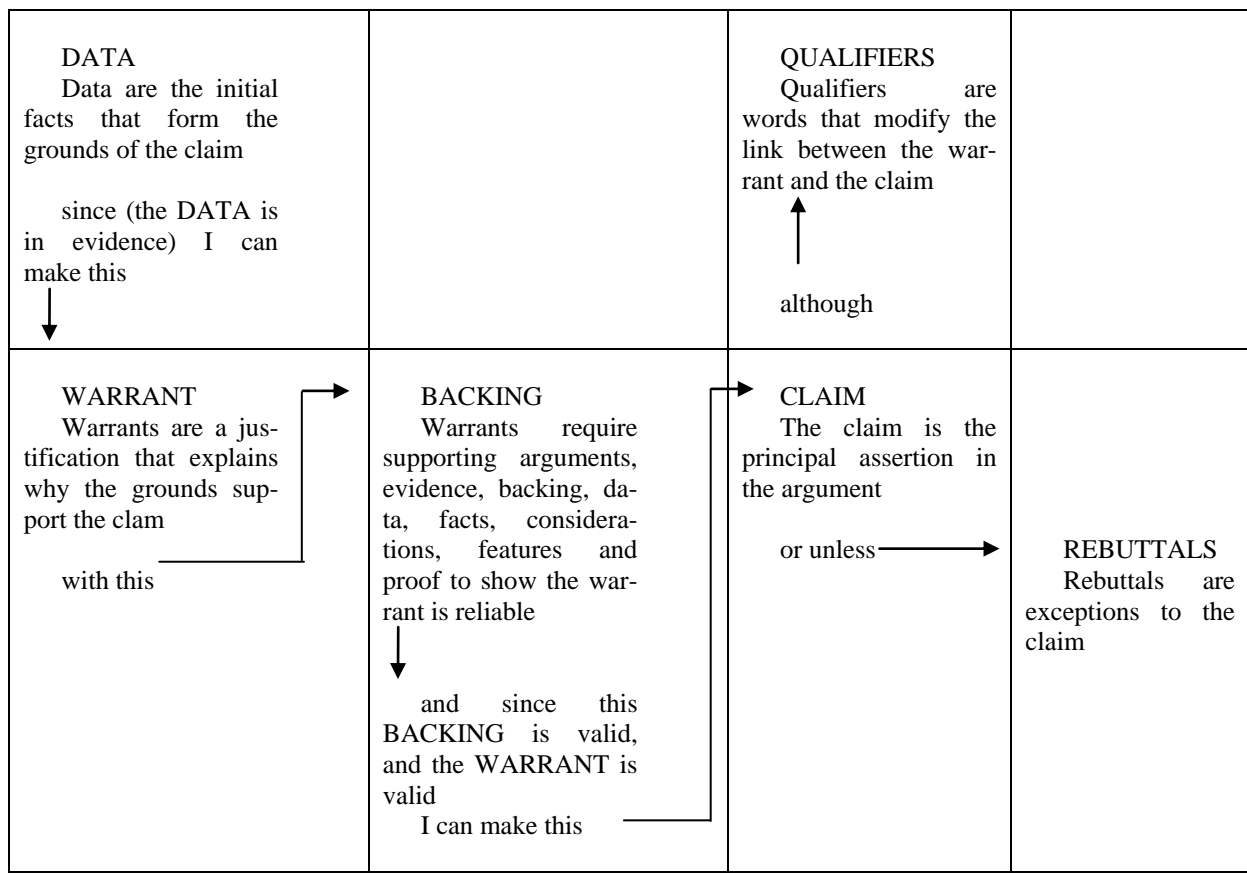
<sup>2</sup> Note that do reduce any idea of self-interest or an undue “personal” tone to my explanation, I could alter the foregoing, and discuss what “we” do, what “we” believe, and what “we” are. However, I ask the reader’s allowance to continue with “I.”

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle combined in his examination of “habit” the conceptions of “doing” and “being” as sources of virtuous action in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “by *doing* the acts that we *do* in our transactions with other men we *become* just or unjust” (29 emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> The overall logical framework of Aristotle’s philosophy is, of course, far from “arid” and wholly inflexible, and I focus here, as Toulmin does, on the syllogism’s inferential function, with its “misleadingly few” logical/argumentative elements (Toulmin, *Uses of Argument* 96). Toulmin, I believe, refers not only to Aristotle, but to rhetoric and argument in the centuries following him (the majority of which, of course, was based almost wholly on Aristotle), which can be viewed in many times and places as restrictive, conservative (even reactionary), and exclusive.

<sup>5</sup> With its pragmatic elements clearly based on actual experience, Toulmin’s model might effectively be seen as complementary to other important modern conceptions of decision-making that incorporate the effects of information, experience, preferences, expectations and group interaction in decision-making, such as Herbert Simon’s “bounded rationality,” Kurt Lewin’s “field theory,” or Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky’s “prospect theory.”

**Figure 1:** The Stephen Toulmin Argumentation Model



Toulmin’s data and backing can be seen, broadly, as similar to Cecelia Wainryb (University of Utah) and Elliot Turiel’s (Berkeley) “informational features” (205) and “informational assumptions” (207), which form one prong of their two-pronged moral decision-making model (the other is constituted of “moral conceptions,” which relate to my own conception of absolute moral principles, to be discussed below). Toulmin’s warrant, meanwhile, nicely incorporates formal logical principles in this model, linking a decision process’s grounds (data, backing) to the essential claim being made. The additional components of the model can also be seen as fitting into a rigorously logical paradigm, and the inclusion of qualification and rebuttal further insinuates modality into his model.<sup>6</sup> Though I trust that the Toulmin-based model is in large part self-explanatory, please see Appendices 1-3 for examples of moral decisions made with the model.

Impressively pragmatic, accommodatingly multi-faceted, deeply constituted with modality, Toulmin’s model takes into account the natural complexity of argumentation and decision-making, enabling solutions that incorporate sound data and rational analysis, allowance for competing claims, modification and development of ideas, and inclusion of individual beliefs and broadly held moral principles. Just as important as these technical qualities, however, the multilateral, participatory model fits constructively within cooperative communities evincing “genuinely collaborative moral activity,” for it is no less than here that “the true power and value of principle-invoking moral discourse becomes visible” (both Clark 124).

#### 4. THE VALUE OF MORAL ABSOLUTES

In addition to the above points, Toulmin posits in his model “field-dependent” elements that can arise in an argument—varied conditions, expectations, data sets, logical types, etc., which can vary from argument to argument, and are analyzed on a case-by-case basis. We may broadly relate field-dependent conditions to the conception of modality, in that their variable quality accords with the contingency inherent in moral decision-making.

<sup>6</sup>Keen readers will note how, in addition to its logical and rhetorical features the model can, impressively, be applied upward, illuminating human epistemology in ways that provide insight into these logical and rhetorical practices. I refer here, broadly, to Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, which includes themes of the functions of orality and writing in the human endeavor; modes of interpreting reality and experience, with a focus on practical moral issues; and individual and community ontology and interaction and the value of concrete, localized cultural and historical contexts.

In addition, Toulmin proposes a class of fixed “field-invariant” elements to be included in argumentation, and this points toward an important contour of my expansion of the Toulmin model—the conception of absolute moral principles. We saw above that Toulmin in general opposes the use of absolutes in decision-making, considering them inflexible, lacking appropriate context, and frequently irrelevant to situations at hand. Other analysts and philosophers have also been wary of moral absolutes, and the associated term “absolutism” is usually seen as a dangerous current of narrow-minded, reactionary zealotry. Andy Clark warns us away from “summary moral rules and principles” (115), which can be a “doomed attempt to reconstruct the high-dimensional space of moral reason in a fundamentally low-dimensional medium” (114). (Clark is professor of philosophy at the University of Edinburgh).

Human experience certainly shows that absolute claims can on occasion be mistaken, outdated, unconstructively rigid or inappropriate to a given situation. I will examine this point in more detail below, but for now I will say that while useful in its deconstruction of imperforate philosophical and ethical systems, an anti-absolute stance is too limiting for my purposes (and in fact such a stance contradicts elements of the Toulmin model, which I will explain below). To dismiss or overlook the potential for absolute best behavior is a most unattractive alternative in moral philosophy. Intuitionism posits, not inaccurately I think, that humans possess a faculty that allows them to perceive a certain stable of absolute moral values (that these have been in part arrived at and modified through experience qualifies but does not change this view). Wainryb and Turiel write that such universal (perhaps I should say, “global”) perceptions “[explain] why little cross-cultural variation exists in moral prescriptions; experiences with harm and injustice are likely to take place in diverse cultures, and it is reasonable that individuals everywhere will generate similar prescriptions based on the features of such experiences” (212). Even Andy Clark writes that absolute principles and maxims can be used effectively within collaborative moral decision-making, and that “[s]uch principles and maxims [...] lay out some rough guides and signposts that constrain the space to be explored in the search for a cooperative solution” (122). Note however, that Clark continues, “such summary rules and principles are themselves negotiable, but they provide the essential starting point of informed moral debate” (122, emphasis added).

Clark’s overall point perfectly accords with my own feelings. My expansion of the Toulmin model will incorporate absolute moral principles, but this does not mean that I am abandoning the conception of modality in moral decision-making. Even the most convincing absolute moral guidelines, as Clark notes, will on occasion be called into question, and subjected to competing demands, qualifications and even rebuttals that may require one to stand down from absolutism proper (the issue of abortion is perhaps most well-known in these respects). Fortunately, the multi-tiered, multi-dimensional Toulmin model provides the flexibility necessary in these situations, and in this sense, absolutes can be seen as existing interactively in a larger, flexible context of human experience, expectation and purpose. In a word, field-invariant absolutes are not immune to scrutiny and appropriately constructive emplacement within this model—that is, they could at times function as “field-dependent” elements in a moral decision process, and as well, different absolutes could in principle be employed as any of the main constituents of the model, whether as part of the grounds, the warrant, the claim, etc.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, the Toulmin model accommodates both invariance and changefulness, allowing absolute principles and variable data to condition each other during a decision-making process, and in turn to be modified and/or strengthened by qualification, reciprocity, competing claims and rebuttal. With these animating and fortifying conceptions thoroughly alloyed into the model, we may forge ahead—but first one final note.

My emphasis above on modality and flexibility may lead some to feel that I have weakened, overridden or canceled the functioning of moral absolutes in this model. I do not believe this is true. As noted, absolute values may not dictate decisions in every instance, but I believe they will invariably emerge from the decision-making testing ground essentially intact, ready to be considered or employed on another day. Absolute principles such as “do not kill or hurt innocent people unjustly,” or “do not sexually molest children” for example, have never and I am sure will never be altered by the vast majority of people worldwide, no matter what qualifications, conditions or rebuttals they may be faced with. The value of moral absolutes such as these is above reproach, and I am confident that they can constructively be employed within this model on their own grounds. This said, let me turn to my analysis of specific moral absolute principles, to be considered for use within this decision-making model.

## 5. MORAL ABSOLUTES

The above explanation and arguments in place, exactly which absolute principles am I suggesting for employment within this model? No easy task determining these, but without doubt societies and peoples everywhere have pondered the content of moral absolutes, and so the way is open to making sound determinations. Based on my own understanding (and perhaps a grain of intuition), below I present a preliminary set of field-invariant, absolute elements in moral decision-making, to be seen as possible or likely constituents in this decision-making model. I will narrow this initial set to a yet smaller set, and from there to an even shorter, economical list of “absolute absolutes.” Most will now ask: what are your criteria for selection of these sets of absolute moral principles? Well, if the following questions comprise such considerations, then let my answers guide us:

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Toulmin in *The Uses of Argument* emphasizes that clarification of these functions is essential, in order to prevent inappropriate or unclear overlap.

What do moral judgments mean?

—What is right, best and most constructive for humane interaction and development of individuals and groups participating in the human project.

What justifies moral judgments?

—Experience and a greater charitable conception of the aim and good of individuals and groups participating in the human project, which to some is backed by god; to others, humanism-based generosity and spirit.

How are moral judgments reached?

—By way of a just, humane, inclusive debate among human subjects, addressing all questions that arise, doubts that are raised, and varied points of view, including those critical, and including both absolute principles and those more flexible and accommodating to the various factors and conditions we encounter in our moral lives.<sup>8</sup>

I am confident that the above straightforward conceptions—called “the two great questions in metaethics” by Kwame Anthony Appiah (182)—while no doubt subject to deep reflection and arbitration, cover the important contours of the landscape we are traversing, and can guide us in choosing a set of necessary absolute moral principles. (Kwame Anthony Appiah is Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University.)

Before I introduce this set (these sets), I remind the reader again that any absolutes will, in principle, be grounded on one broad consideration: the contingency, difficulty and challenges that arise in individual and collaborative moral decision-making, which require answers to often conflicting claims, and with decisions often made under pressure. To provide one example, refraining from lying is universally seen as a moral first principle, but in life we sometimes find that we have to allow for a lie, if the net outcome is more valuable, important and humane than the deficiency created by the lie. Few but the most dogmatic would disagree with this point. And so, to reiterate: while moral absolutes will always be absolute in principle, they may not always be in practice, that is, after being subjected to a rational and catholic decision-making process. Other moral absolutes, such as those noted earlier, are much less negotiable than this lying example. Is there something of a hierarchy of moral absolutes? No doubt there is, but I will not here venture into this analysis. Instead I present below my first set of moral absolutes culled from various sources, including Aristotle, Stoic philosophy, Buddhism, Jeremy Bentham, Christianity and others.<sup>9</sup>

### **Absolute Moral Principles: List 1**

1. Do not kill innocent people
2. Do not cause unnecessary pain or suffering
3. Do not steal or damage property
4. Tell the truth; keep promises
5. Do not deprive others of freedom unjustly
6. Be grateful when appropriate
7. Be wise, strive to learn
8. Be happy, hopeful
9. Be responsible, cooperative
10. Be faithful to loved ones

The above conceptions are to be placed alongside List 2 below, which is in some senses refines and reduces, in some senses reinforces and expands, and sometimes simply mirrors (and shortens), List 1:

### **Absolute Moral Principles: List 2**

1. Be just
2. Be temperate
3. Be benevolent, lenient
4. Be courageous
5. Be dutiful
6. Be patient
7. Be faithful

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<sup>8</sup> First two questions from Appiah 183, last by Pendery. And note that I have included some text that will be repeated later in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> I acknowledge the work of Louis P. Pojman, in his *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature*, for guidance in selecting these items.

Finally, and keeping an overall delicate balance in mind, I distill the above lists to a basic set of absolutes, to be considered in this Toulmin-based moral decision-making model. Please note that such a short list is bound to appear indefinite, broadly inclusive, hypothetical or presumptive. Such qualities are in fact largely my aim, and thus this list is not intended to be an easy, quick-fix moral recipe. No one, not least myself, will say I have created some sort of “Three Commandments.” My list is instead closer to Clark’s “guides and signposts,” with the constituents to be used when appropriate within the Toulmin model:

**Absolute Moral Principles: List 3**

1. Be benevolent to oneself and others
2. Be just to oneself and others
3. Afford trust to oneself and others

If my final list seems denuded, I do not believe this is so, and such an economical model should, overall, be useful and provide clarity going forward. Simply adopting the three moral absolutes I present here would, I believe, if boldly, yield a more constructive and satisfying human existence. But, admittedly, adoption of absolutes has always been somewhat idealistic, all-inclusive, hypothetical or presumptive. Worse, absolutism risks being insulated, one-dimensional or dogmatic. To be sure I hope to avoid these failings—by not celebrating these absolute principles as “the three commandments,” and by way of their pragmatic incorporation within the overall decision-making model I have proposed. It’s as simple as that.

Note below how the above three principles can incorporate and contextualize all of the major points in my first two lists of moral absolutes. The borders of the following comparisons are porous, to be sure, but I think that they are porous in an accommodating and thus helpful way. I think it may be clearest to employ a table for the following:

<b>Absolute principles List 3</b>	<b>Incorporates principle #s in Absolute Principles List 1</b>	<b>Incorporates principle #s in Ab- solute Principles List 2</b>
Be benevolent to oneself and others	1-5, 8-9	1-4, 6-7
Be just to oneself and others	1-6, 9-10	1, 2, 4-7
Afford trust to oneself and others	8-10	5, 7

Most of the above points are, I think, clear enough, but others are perhaps a bit esoteric. For example I have linked “be wise, strive to learn” in List 1 with “afford trust to oneself and others” in List 3 (the very idea, “afford trust,” requires additional explanation, which I will provide, below). My thinking here is that when you embark on a program of learning (whether a new skill, an intellectual endeavor such as studying science or humanities, or learning more about your own behavior and beliefs [know thyself], in order to more wisely and constructively steer yourself in life), such a process is imbued with trust in many different ways. For example, in order to confidently begin, you must enter a learning process with a foundation of trust in the given information you study (even a skeptical attitude in learning is linked to trust in the information’s overall value in an epistemological framework). One must often afford trust to teachers and other guides during a learning process. Additionally, you must trust that you are capable of entering the learning process in a useful and accommodating way. Ultimately, when you have learned new skills, your trust in yourself and others’ trust in you is likely increased (you are more capable, more skilled in life). I link “be dutiful” in List 2 to “be just” and “afford trust” in List 3 in that fulfilling one’s duty can be seen as treating others (and even oneself) justly, while agreeing to duty can be based on mutual trust (List 1, point 9, “be responsible, cooperative” can also be seen in light of duty and trust). Additionally, trust can be linked to “be courageous” (point 4, List 2), in that one must trust oneself to feel the ability to be courageous in challenging or dangerous situations. “Be courageous” is a difficult absolute principle, for one cannot expect all people at all times to be courageous in fearful situations. This does not obviate the principle, however, for throughout this paper I have stressed that absolute principles will at times be less than 100% absolute, in practice, and thus courage might very well be qualified in different situations. I have also linked “be courageous” to “be benevolent” and “be just” in List 3, in that courage can be seen as a way of meting out justice (if you repel a person who is unjustly hurting another person, you are providing justice to both the attacker and to the victim), as well as a benevolent response to a violent or unjust situation.

To continue this discussion and the point introduced in footnote 1, (that I reject a simplistic “ought vs. is” approach to ethics) let me explain in more detail two key points about my list of three moral absolutes. Readers may find my recommendation in point 3, List 3, to “afford trust to oneself and others” a bit unusual. I believe, however, that this point has deep positive implications for our philosophical, moral and ethical lives. My point here comprises: 1) a given unconditional trust to be afforded to fellow human beings, which can be understood to accord with universal ontological equality; 2) notions of catholic fairness; 3) the innate excellence of the human project, which is deserving of trust; and, higher still,

4) the ultimate beneficial good of life, outside of human control which creates a present and a future that can be trusted. This said, combining this idea with my inclusion of “to oneself and others” in the above three points engenders, I believe, an expansive, constructive and deeply positive moral framework. First and in some ways foremost, a full-bodied conception of being genuinely just to, benevolent to, and affording trust to oneself allows for the supreme value of the of the individual, of the individual’s self-esteem. Such a value of the individual must of course in no way undermine the value of a communal imperative in moral life, and ultimately these two moral approaches are anything but mutually exclusive, and indeed are reciprocally strengthening.

In sum, it is my belief that this encompassing conception of the trusted and trusting individual, firmly emplaced within a trusted and trusting community—though it would probably require a substantial leap of faith and a lot of hard work to effect (but what moral philosophy does not?)—could result in a moral environment deeply imbued with fairness, satisfaction, happiness, peace, strength of character, and justice (to say nothing of trust!). In short, this link of the individual and the community could fortify the very tapestry of existence, with individual threads within the community fabric working in entrusted cooperation to create a best moral life.

## **6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

I am an independent scholar and teacher working in Taipei, Taiwan. This paper was produced solely by me, and there are no additional acknowledgments to make, other than acknowledging the work of the writers I have cited in this paper. This paper presents no conflict of interest in cultural, political or scholarly ways.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

It’s a jungle out there in the world of moral principles and decision-making, with situations and conditions that are sometimes clear and rational, sometimes opaque and confusing; sometimes cooperative and constructive; sometimes insular and nettlesome; sometimes important, even momentous, sometimes merely serviceable, even trifling. To effectively, predictably and humanely make our way in such conditions, we need a model of moral decision-making that is robust, realistic and pragmatic, but also flexible, constructive and benignant; one that can manage the demands of both weighty absolute principles, as well as less vexing questions of pragmatic moral behavior. Within this model, we must humanely link the moral aims of the individual to communities at large, which widen out from friends and family, to community, to nation, to the world... and beyond. No moral decision-making model is ever likely to be perfect, and we should simply endeavor to craft one that is maximally flexible and accommodating to the various factors and conditions we encounter in our moral lives. I have tried to outline such a model.

Some will scoff at my conception—too idealistic they will say, too broad, not decisively totalizing enough. Is my approach, with its incorporation of ostensibly opposing poles of deontology and pragmatism, weakened in these ways? In my view, the answer is a resolute “no;” but even if it is perhaps less than 100 percent effective or fully applicable today, perhaps one day it won’t be. And in any case it is my belief that to omit any constructive step or any necessary condition or any beneficial aim in such a central concern of the human project will result in half-measures. And finally, if our goal is a better world and life for individuals and communities—and of course it is—allow me to make one last exhortation, and encourage us all to: trust ourselves and others; treat ourselves and others well; and in the end, as Seamus Heaney writes:

Your obligation  
is not discharged by any common rite.  
What you must do must be done on your own<sup>10</sup>

We are what we decide—we are what we do. And so, let us set out to do what “must be done” in our moral lives and decisions.

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<sup>10</sup> “Station Island,” Seamus Heaney.



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### **Appendix 1: Abortion: a moral decision based on the Toulmin model**

Claim: Abortion is immoral and unborn life should never be terminated.

Data: Each and every human DNA coding is absolutely unique, and the same person can never be replicated after his or her death.

Warrant: Because every human DNA coding is absolutely unique, and the same person can never be replicated after his or her death, even by the same parents, abortion is immoral and unborn life should not be terminated.

Backing: Almost all religious, moral and philosophical traditions of the world view life as innately sacred; each person has the potential at birth to make important contributions to humanity, and this positive conception must be assumed at the start (universal fairness).

Qualifier: The termination of the lives of unborn children could be terminated in some extreme cases, such as those that involve rape or incest.

Rebuttal: A woman or a woman and her partner have the right to make this decision, free of the interference of others; there is no definite proof that human life is “innately sacred”; the development of DNA technologies may change the calculus of uniqueness and reproducibility of DNA coding in humans.

### **Appendix 2: Lying: a moral decision based on the Toulmin model**

Claim: Lying is acceptable in some conditions.

Data: James is in the last stages of a terminal disease, and will only live a few more days or weeks. All that is human possible to save him and make him more comfortable has been done.

Warrant: Telling James certain lies is acceptable because James will soon die, and certain lies will make his life more comfortable, and will not exacerbate his condition.

Backing: Some philosophies have analyzed this issue and agree that telling lies in certain situations is not only acceptable, but contributes to the greater good of humanity; the majority of people around the world would agree with this.

Qualifier: Any lie told to any person must be carefully considered in terms of its impact and outcomes; one lie can lead to another, and you must ensure that a sink of falsehood is not created in the even of a given first lie, which could ultimately hurt James and the community he is part of.

Rebuttal: James may not die, and James remains a living human with rights accorded thereof, and with responsibilities due to him as are due to any other person and to the community he lives in; to lie to him would violate these rights and responsibilities, and would be to use James in false ways, as party to a falsehood (which is probably done simply to balm our own emotions).

Rebuttal of rebuttal: The likelihood is so great, and reversals of such a dramatic condition are so rare, that we must assume this is true in order to make the best and most constructive decisions for James.

### **Appendix 3: An Absolute Value: a moral decision based on the Toulmin model**

Claim: Afford trust to oneself and others.

Data: Trust is by definition a helpful and constructive response, defined as “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition, 1998); it also carries meaning of hope, confidence, reliance, and care. A given unconditional trust to be afforded to fellow human beings can be understood to accord with universal ontological equality, which in just societies is accepted as a first-order principle.

Warrant: Because trust is an essential strengthening tissue in human existence, it should be afforded in the first place to oneself and others.

Backing: Trust is also useful in terms of duty, cooperation, patience, happiness and learning, which further strengthens the importance of trust as a first order principle.

Qualifier: There are untrustworthy people and situations in the world, and at these times trust may have to be withheld, for the safety of oneself and others.

Rebuttal: The majority of people in the world are self-interested and thus untrustworthy; additionally, by definition most natural situations cannot be trusted, and danger is everywhere. The best approach is to not trust any person or any situation. Only if trust is first earned should it be reciprocated.