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7. "Moral wisdom seems to be as little connected to knowledge of ethical theory as playing good tennis is to knowledge of physics" (Emrys Westacott). To what extent should our actions be guided by our theories in ethics and elsewhere?  
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Despite Emrys Westacott's views, plenty of evidence seems to suggest that physics does in fact play an important role in helping tennis players improve their technique. Why else would professional tennis players hire coaches that advise them based on the science of forces, trajectories and spins? However, can the same be said for the influence that ethical theories have in situations that require us to make morally correct decisions? One method of decoding this question is to compare how physics and ethical theories can be seen through various Ways of Knowledge. After evaluation, it becomes evident that while the laws of physics cannot be affected by emotion, perception, reason or language, ethical theories are subject to influence by these unpredictable factors. Therefore, I will establish in the following paragraphs that physics, which is based on absolutes, cannot be compared to ethical theories. Based on this, I will then consider various Ways of Knowledge to evaluate the extent to which moral wisdom should be influenced by ethical theories.

Before any further exploration, a definition of the terms "moral wisdom" and "ethical theories" must be agreed upon. "Moral wisdom" will be defined as the knowledge that allows a person to distinguish between right and wrong. It varies between every individual, depending on what forms the basis of this knowledge. The phrase "ethical theories" is more difficult to define, as its two main principles – deontology and teleology – conflict with each other. Deontological philosophers would assert that all people should follow their obligations and duties to another individual or society when dealing with an ethical dilemma. These obligations could include following the law, never lying, or taking good care of a pet. Teleological philosophers have a different perspective, and claim that when faced with an ethical dilemma, one should predict the consequences of each decision and

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make the choice that would yield the greatest good for the greatest number. There is, however, a common thread between these two principles: they both crumble in the face of reality and the unpredictability of humans. By exploring these flaws, I will demonstrate that ethical theories cannot and should not be the only basis of moral wisdom.

Two scenarios will be considered to demonstrate the results when deontological or teleological principles dictate an individual's decisions in an ethical dilemma. Firstly, in the case of deontology, we will take the example of Immanuel Kant, who famously argued that one should never lie as this is one's duty to the community. Let us imagine that a Nazi official knocks on the door of a firm believer in Kant's ideas, and asks whether he is hiding Jews in his house. If the man was indeed protecting Jewish friends in the cellar, what would he say based on deontological theories? Surely it is not an answer that our "moral wisdom" should acknowledge as the right choice? Now, to demonstrate the flaw in the teleological theories, let us once again imagine a different situation. A murderer comes up to you with a loved one tied up in a rope. He tells you to choose whether your loved one, or ten other strangers, should be killed. He threatens that if you do not make a decision within the next minute, everyone will be dead. Would you stop and evaluate the outcomes of each choice, and follow the teleological theory that in order to yield the greatest good for the greatest number, your loved one should be killed? No one I know would make that choice. Ethical theories may seem reasonable on paper, but we are only human and our actions cannot be programmed. This demonstrates that rational reasoning as a Way of Knowing – represented by these ethical theories – cannot always instruct us humans when under pressure or when faced with fear.

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Further flaws of ethical theories become evident when another Way of Knowing, language, is taken into consideration. Words can be interpreted by different people in various ways, and are open to misunderstandings and conflicting connotations. For example, teleological theories state that one should do what will result in the "greatest good for the greatest number", but what does the term "good" actually mean? To a Roman Catholic person who believes that one shall not kill, honour killings may be unacceptable. However, in a city called Basra in Iraq, more than 81 people who were believed to have brought dishonor to the family were killed during 2008 alone (Sarhan 2008). This clearly demonstrates that a simple word such as "good" can have so many interpretations, and because of this, ethical theories fail us in many situations.

The implication of the ideas developed in the previous paragraphs is that the relationship between ethical theories and moral wisdom cannot be likened to that between physics and tennis. This is because Ethics and Science are Areas of Knowledge in which the processing of information and the deducing of conclusions are very different. Physics, being a science, is based on known parameters. In the case of tennis, these are the ball, the racquet, and the court. The rules set by physics are undeniable and inescapable. For example, a tennis ball will not defy the law of gravity regardless of what Way of Knowing is used – one could desperately hope (emotion), be convinced that they saw it defy gravity (perception), or describe it doing so (language), but this will not prevent the ball from falling downwards. Contrastingly, in an ethical dilemma, every factor is unknown. Our minds are undependable in that the decisions it makes are subject to emotions, language and sense. Our minds are

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biased, and therefore, so are our actions. Although we may attempt to follow ethical theories, the influence which these guidelines can have over our decisions of right and wrong are limited.

Now that we have arrived at the concept that ethical theories are not and should not be the only basis for moral wisdom, we must now evaluate the extent to which these set theories should influence our actions. As a starting point for answering this question, I will take the extreme example of the Jamie Bulgers murder case back in 1993. One day, Jamie was abducted in a shopping center by two ten year old boys and was later murdered. What could have caused these two ten year old boys to have such a misled idea of what was right and wrong? Many media commentators and psychiatrists have blamed this on the lack of moral education for these two boys from their parents, who were separated, alcoholic, depressed and abusive. This implies that these boys were not exposed to ethical theories or rational reasoning and that instead, they based their "moral wisdom" on their experiences of being abused and their feelings of anger, fear and hatred. Therefore, their "moral wisdom" – and consequently their actions – was misguided. After reading about this incident, I thought back on where my own "moral wisdom" came from and why I learnt not to murder people. I realized that it was also rooted in what I had perceived and felt as a child, but that unlike for the murderers, my parents generally followed ethical theories and made me feel remorse when I did something unethical. Therefore, we can argue that while ethical theories cannot completely determine our actions in ethical dilemmas, to a certain extent, they should guide our emotions and perceptions, as otherwise, misleading influences can lead to unethical "moral wisdom".

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These examples and scenarios clearly demonstrate that while it is not possible for humans – with our unpredictability and vulnerability to being affected by emotions, perceptions and language – to rigidly follow ethical theories, neglecting them altogether as the 10 year old murderers did only leads to unethical situations. Therefore, people should be made to use ethical theories that guide instead of dictate, but at the same time that are not subject to misinterpretations by people of different backgrounds, religions and nationalities. Although I cannot determine one “correct” ethical theory, I believe that the principle that is in most agreement with the conclusion I have deduced is pluralistic deontology, introduced by twentieth century philosopher W. D. Ross. He believes that there are a number of duties (including beneficence and nonmalfeasance) that generally hold, but do not bind us absolutely. When conflicts occur between these duties, only one of them can be fulfilled. Stephen Toulmin (1950) wrote that in this case, individuals "weigh up, as well as [they] can, the risks involved in ignoring either, and choose 'the lesser of two evils'." If, for instance, there is a clash between duties not to lie and not to kill, one would choose to lie in order to save an innocent life.

In conclusion, it can be said that ethical theories in reality do not *dictate* many people’s “moral wisdom” because of its flaws or people’s lack of exposure to these principles. However, at the same time, ethical theories should serve as *guidelines* to prevent people from gaining misled “moral wisdom”. This differs to the relationship between physics and tennis in that scientific laws are not guides – instead they are fixed rules. There is, nevertheless, also a similarity. Good tennis is determined not just by physics, but also by

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physical strengths and techniques. Likewise, “moral wisdom” is steered not just by ethical theories, but also by emotions and perceptions. Drawing from these comparisons and previous examples, it can be said that our actions should be influenced by a good balance between various Ways of Knowledge that are guided – but not strictly regulated – by theories in ethics and elsewhere.

**1586 words**

### **References**

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