

“Living the Theory” Report

At the beginning of the semester, you will choose two sections of the course to do these presentations on. (Students who don’t choose their sections by the end of the week will have them assigned to them.) From those two sections, choose two particular ethical theories. For this assignment, you are tasked with *living* those two theories for a whole day each. You’ll then present to the class at the end of that section on your experience.

What “Living the Theory” Means

The phrase is doing real work here, so it’s worth being clear about it. *Living* the theory does not mean simply performing actions the theory would endorse, nor does it mean asking yourself at each moment “what would Theory X say to do?” and complying. It means making a genuine attempt to *deliberate from inside the theory* – to think the way someone committed to that theory would think, weigh the considerations they would weigh, and feel the pull of the reasons they would find compelling.

This is harder than it sounds. The theory has to actually be doing the work of your decision-making, not just providing post-hoc justification for what you were going to do anyway. If at the end of the day every decision you made would have been the same regardless of which theory you were “living,” you weren’t really living it.

Things to Include in the Presentation

- Identify one decision made during the day that you think best exemplifies the chosen theory. Why do you think this decision best exemplifies the theory? What were the alternatives, and why did the theory recommend this one over them?
- Reflect on what living the theory told you about its plausibility as a moral theory, and about its strengths and weaknesses.
- Explain what, if anything, you have learned by living the theory for a day.

What Counts as Good Reflection

The interesting question is not whether you ended up liking the theory or not. The interesting question is what *kind of evidence* living the theory produced. Some things worth attending to:

- Were there situations where you found you couldn’t apply the theory at all? What made them resistant?
- Were there decisions where the theory recommended a course of action you couldn’t, on reflection, endorse? What does that tell you?
- Did the theory turn out to demand *more* of you than you expected? Or *less*?
- Did you notice yourself reaching for considerations the theory doesn’t license – and if so, what does that say about either you or the theory?

- Were there moments where the theory clarified something you had previously been confused about? What was it?

“The Theory Failed Me” vs. “I Failed the Theory”

This distinction is the heart of the assignment, and it is the hardest part of the reflection.

When living a theory is hard, the easy conclusion is that the theory is implausible. But this conclusion needs to be earned. There are at least three reasons living a theory might be hard, and only one of them tells against the theory:

3. *The theory makes genuinely unreasonable demands.* This is a real philosophical objection – but only if you can show that the demands are unreasonable rather than merely uncomfortable.
4. *You didn't really try.* The theory wasn't the problem; your engagement with it was. This is not an objection to the theory.
5. *The theory presupposes practical wisdom or character you don't yet have.* The theory might be perfectly correct, but living it requires capacities (perception, judgement, virtuous habits) that aren't built in a day. The fact that *you* can't live it well isn't evidence the theory is wrong.

A good reflection takes seriously which of these is going on, rather than collapsing them into “this theory is implausible because I found it hard.”

Common Failure Modes

- **Performance art.** Treating the day as a stage on which to enact the theory dramatically, rather than as an honest experiment in moral living. The audience for this assignment is not the class; it is yourself.
- **Manufactured dilemmas.** Constructing or engineering situations *during the day* to make the assignment philosophically interesting. This defeats the assignment. The point is to engage with the moral texture of the day you would otherwise have had, not to stage-manage a day that produces good philosophical anecdotes. If your day was mostly mundane, the interesting question is what the theory has to say about mundane life.
- **Cherry-picking.** Reporting only the decisions that make the theory look good (or look bad, if that's the story you want to tell) and omitting the rest.
- **Theory-shaped conclusions you already held.** If your reflection on the theory looks suspiciously like the view you had of it before the assignment began, something has gone wrong. The assignment should *move* your view of the theory – perhaps not by much, and perhaps not in the obvious direction, but it should move it. If it hasn't, you probably weren't really living it.
- **Reflection in the abstract.** Reflecting on the theory rather than on the *experience of trying to use it*. The assignment isn't asking you to write a critique of the theory; it's asking you to report what trying to live it actually told you.