

# Is Ruby Halal?

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The starting point here is last episode's essay on programming languages, and this here is basically an explanation and generalization of why I wrote it. For those who didn't read it (and I don't blame ya), here's a summary in the form a description of my ideal girlfriend: she should be an Asian Jewess, around 172–174cm tall, gothy, sporty, significantly smarter than me, significantly cuter than me, significantly better socialized than me, willing to hang out with me, very well organized but endlessly spontaneous, enjoys walks along the beach<sup>1</sup>, does intellectually challenging work that involves being outdoors, and plays guitar in a rock band. Yeah.

So: too bad half of those things contradict the other half, eh.

The first key difference between the problem of picking a programming language and the problem of picking a significant other is that the programming language doesn't have to like you back. The liking-you-back issue creates many volumes' worth of interesting stories, all of which I will ignore here, in favor of the the other key difference: unlike many girl/boyfriends, programs are often shared among friends and coworkers, meaning that there are externalities in my arbitrary, personal-preference choice.

Personal preference plus externalities is the perfect recipe for never-ending, repetitive debate.

**Debating the undebatable** Under Jewish law, one must never say the Name of God. In fact, there is none—it's sort of a mythical incantation, used to breathe life into Golems and otherwise tell monotheistic fairy tales. Under Islamic law, one must speak the Name of God when slaughtering an animal for the animal's flesh to be halal. My reading here is that there is therefore no way for meat to be both halal and kosher.

And let's note, by the way, that kosher and halal laws are not cast as rules about keeping clean for the sake of disease prevention. They're ethical laws, meaning that, like personal preference, they can't really be debated. It's not like somebody will finally find the correct answer and write it down for everybody to see. We can't even agree to basic axioms like 'you should be nice to people' or 'don't be wasteful'.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.xkcd.com/c120.html>

Do ethical laws induce externality problems? From the looks of it, yes they do, because so many people spend so much time trying to get other people to conform to their personal ethics. Ethics are an extreme form of that other personal preference, aesthetics, and seeing somebody commit what you consider to be an unethical act is often on par with watching somebody wearing a floppy brown sweater with spandex safety orange tights.

Fortunately, almost everybody understands that there is no point going up to Mr. Brown-and-orange and telling him he needs to change, because we all know exactly how the conversation will go: some variant of ‘I have my own personal preferences’ or ‘who are you to impose your arbitrary choices upon me’. That is, it would be a boring argument, because there is fundamentally no right answer.

When does human life begin? I have no idea, and anybody who says otherwise is guilty of hubris.

Gee, that was a fun debate, wasn’t it.

And the problem with that non-debate, as with this essay, is that it has no emotionally satisfying conclusion. The natural form of a debate is for one side to present its best arguments, the other side to present its own, and then both sides go home and think about it. But the form of debate that is emotionally satisfying has a resounding conclusion, where one side tearfully confesses to the other, ‘OK, I was wrong!’ But with arguments of ethics or personal preference, this sort of resolution happens about once every never.

But there’s a simple way to fix this problem: invent statistics.

After all, not all debates are mere issues of personal preference. A question like ‘will building this road or starting this war improve the economy’ has a definite answer, though we’re typically not smart enough to know it. There is valid grounds for debate there.

But for ethics and personal preference issues, we can still make it look like there are valid grounds for debate. Find out whether abortions decrease crime [The paper that claims this, by Steven “Freakonomics” Leavitt and another not-famous economist, has been shown to be based on erroneous calculations. PDF<sup>2</sup>], find out whether people commit more errors when commas are used as separators or terminators, run benchmarks<sup>3</sup>, accuse the author of the file system you don’t like of being a murderer<sup>4</sup>. With enough haphazard facts, any debate about pure personal preference regarding simple trade-offs can be extended to years of tedium.

This turns debates that should be of the natural form (both sides state opinions, then go home) into the resounding form of debate, where both sides attempt to get the other side to tearfully confess the errors of its ways. But the sheen of facts doesn’t change the fundamental nature of debates over ethics or personal preference, and because these are debates where nobody is actually wrong, nobody will ever be convinced to bring about an emotionally satisfying

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.bos.frb.org/economic/wp/wp2005/wp0515.pdf>

<sup>3</sup><http://shootout.alioth.debian.org/>

<sup>4</sup>[http://cbs5.com/localwire/localnews/bcn/2006/09/13/n/HeadlineNews/HOME-SEARCHED/resources\\_bcn.html](http://cbs5.com/localwire/localnews/bcn/2006/09/13/n/HeadlineNews/HOME-SEARCHED/resources_bcn.html)

conclusion. We instead simply have a new variant on the recipe for tedious, never-ending debate.