

Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY: ETHICS

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Rebus Community



Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics by Frank Aragbonfoh Abumere, Douglas Giles, Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao, Michael Klenk, Joseph Kranak, Kathryn MacKay, Jeffrey Morgan, Paul Rezkalla, George Matthews (Book Editor), and Christina Hendricks (Series Editor) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

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WHAT IS AN OPEN TEXTBOOK?

CHRISTINA HENDRICKS

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In addition to saving students money, an open textbook can be revised to be better contextualized to one's own teaching. In a recent study of undergraduate students in an introductory level physics course, students reported that the thing they most appreciated about the open textbook used in that course was that it was customized to fit the course, followed very closely by the fact that it was free of cost ([Hendricks, Reinsberg, and Rieger 2017](#)). For example, in an open textbook one may add in examples more relevant to one's own context or the topic of a course, or embedded slides, videos, or other resources. Note from [the licensing information for this book](#) that one must clarify in such cases that the book is an adaptation.

A number of commercial publishers offer relatively inexpensive digital textbooks (whether on their own or available through an access code that students must pay to purchase), but these may have certain limitations and other issues:

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HOW TO ACCESS AND USE THE BOOKS

CHRISTINA HENDRICKS

We hope the books (or chapters in the books) will be adopted for introductory-level courses in philosophy, as part of required readings. You may use the books as they are, or create adaptations or ancillaries. One of the important benefits of the Introduction to Philosophy series is that instructors can mix and match chapters from various books to make their own customized set of readings for their courses.

Be sure to read [the licensing information](#) carefully and attribute the chapters or book properly when reusing, redistributing, or adapting.

Each book can be read online, and is also downloadable in multiple formats, from their respective book home pages (e.g., [Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics](#)).

- The .odt format can be opened by Open Office, Libre Office, or Microsoft Word. Note that there may be some issues with formatting on this format, and hyperlinks may not appear if opened with MS Word.
- The PDF files can be edited with Adobe Acrobat (the full program, not just the Reader) or printed out. The print version of the PDF does not have hyperlinks.
- The EPUB and MOBI files can be loaded onto digital reading platforms like Adobe Digital Editions, Apple Books, and Kindle. They can also be edited using Pressbooks or tools like Calibre.
- Edits can be made using the XHTML format or via the Pressbooks XML format (for easier adaptation in Pressbooks).
- The book is also available for download as a Common Cartridge 1.1 file (with web links) for import into your learning management system (see [instructions for importing Common Cartridge files](#), from the Pressbooks User Guide).

The multiple editable formats allow instructors to adapt the books as needed to fit their contexts. Another way to create adaptations is to involve students in contributing to open textbooks. Students may add new sections to an adapted book, link to other resources, create discussion questions or

quiz questions, and more. Please see Rebus Community's [A Guide to Making Open Textbooks with Students](#) for more information and ideas.

If you plan to use or adapt one or more books (or chapters), we'd love to hear about it! Please let us know on [the Rebus Community platform](#), and also on [our adoption form](#).

And if you have [feedback or suggestions about the book](#), we would really appreciate those as well. We have a separate [form for keeping track of issues with digital accessibility](#), so please let us know if you find any.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

CHRISTINA HENDRICKS

This book is part of the *Introduction to Philosophy* open textbook series, a set of nine (and counting?) open access textbooks that are designed to be used for introductory-level, survey courses in philosophy at the post-secondary level.

OVERVIEW OF THE SERIES

This set of books is meant to provide an introduction to some of the major topic areas often covered in introductory-level philosophy courses. I have found in teaching students new to philosophy that many struggle with the new ideas, questions, and approaches they find in introductory courses in philosophy, and that it can be helpful to provide them with texts that explain these in relatively straightforward terms.

When I began this project there were few textbooks that I was happy enough with to ask students to purchase, and even fewer openly licensed textbooks that I could pick and choose chapters from, or revise, to suit my courses. This series was created out of a desire to provide such resources that can be customized to fit different contexts and updated by instructors when needed (rather than waiting for an updated version from a publisher).

Each book is designed to be accessible to students who have little to no background in philosophy, by either eliminating jargon or providing a glossary for specialized philosophical terms. Many chapters in the books provide examples that apply philosophical questions or concepts to concrete objects or experiences that, we hope, many students are familiar with. Questions for reflection and discussion accompany chapters in most of the books, to support students in understanding what to focus on as they are reading.

The chapters in the books provide a broad overview of some of the main discussions and debates in the philosophical literature within a topic area, from the perspective of the chapter authors. Some of the chapters focus on historical approaches and debates, such as ancient theories of aesthetics, substance dualism in Descartes, or classical utilitarian versus Kantian approaches in ethics. Others introduce students to questions and topics in the philosophical literature from just the last few decades.

The books currently in production for the series are:

- *Aesthetics* (Ed. Valery Vinogradovs and Scott Clifton): chapters include ancient aesthetics; beauty in art and nature; the nature of art, art and emotions, art and morality, recent aesthetics
- *Epistemology* (Ed. Brian Barnett): chapters include epistemic justification; rationalism, empiricism and beyond; skepticism; epistemic value, duty, and virtue; epistemology, gender, and society
- *Ethics* (Ed. George Matthews): chapters include ethical relativism, divine command theory and natural law; ethical egoism and social contract theory; virtue ethics; utilitarianism; Kantianism; feminist ethics
- *Metaphysics* (Ed. Adriano Palma): chapters include universals; finitism, infinitism, monism, dualism, pluralism; the possibility of free action; experimental metaphysics
- *Philosophy of Mind* (Ed. Heather Salazar): chapters include Descartes and substance dualism; behaviourism and materialism; functionalism; qualia; freedom of the will
- *Philosophy of Religion* (Ed. Beau Branson): chapters include arguments for belief in God; reasons not to believe; arguments against belief from the cognitive science of religion; critical perspectives on the philosophy of religion as a philosophy of theism
- *Philosophy of Science* (Ed. Eran Asoulin): chapters include empiricism, Popper's conjectures and refutations; Kuhn's normal and revolutionary science; the sociology of scientific knowledge; feminism and the philosophy of science; the problem of induction; explanation
- *Social and Political Philosophy* (Ed. TBA and Douglas Giles): chapters include the ideal society; the state of nature and the modern state; human rights, liberty, and social justice; radical social theories

We envision the books as helping to orient students within the topic areas covered by the chapters, as well as to introduce them to influential philosophical questions and approaches in an accessible way. The books may be used for course readings on their own, or in conjunction with primary source texts by the philosophers discussed in the chapters. We aim thereby to both save students money and to provide a relatively easy route for instructors to customize and update the resources as needed. And we hope that future adaptations will be shared back with the rest of the philosophical community!

HOW THE BOOKS WERE PRODUCED

Contributors to this series have been crowdsourced through email lists, social media, and other means. Each of the books has its own editor, and multiple authors from different parts of the world who have expertise in the topic of the book. This also means that there will inevitably be shifts in voice and tone between chapters, as well as in perspectives. This itself exemplifies the practice of philosophy, insofar as the philosophical questions worth discussing are those that do not yet have settled answers, and towards which there are multiple approaches worthy of consideration (which must, of course, provide arguments to support their claim to such worth).

I have been thrilled with the significant interest these books have generated, such that so many people have been willing to volunteer their time to contribute to them and ensure their quality—not only through careful writing and editing, but also through extensive feedback and review. Each book in the series has between five and ten authors, plus an editor and peer reviewers. It's exciting to see so many philosophers willing to contribute to a project devoted to helping students save money and instructors customize their textbooks!

The book editors, each with expertise in the field of the book they have edited, have done the bulk of the work for the books. They created outlines of chapters that were then peer reviewed and revised accordingly, and they selected authors for each of the chapters. The book editors worked with authors to develop a general approach to each chapter, and coordinated timelines for their completion. Chapters were reviewed by the editors both before and after the books went out for peer review, and the editors ensured revisions occurred where needed. They have also written introductions to their books, and in some cases other chapters as well. As the subject experts for the books, they have had the greatest influence on the content of each book.

My role as series editor started by envisioning the project as a whole and discussing what it might look like with a significant number of philosophers who contributed to shaping it early on. Overall, I have worked the Rebus Community on project management, such as developing author and reviewer guidelines and other workflows, coordinating with the book editors to ensure common approaches across the books, sending out calls for contributors to recruit new participants, and updating the community on the status of the project through the Rebus Community platform. I have reviewed the books, along with peer reviewers, from the perspective of both a philosopher who teaches introductory-level courses and a reader who is not an expert in many of the fields the books cover. As the books near publication, I have coordinated copy editing and importing into the Pressbooks publishing platform (troubleshooting where needed along the way).

Finally, after publication of the books I and the book editors will be working on spreading the word about them and encouraging adoption. I plan to use chapters from a few of the books in my own Introduction to Philosophy courses, and hope to see many more adoptions to come.

This project has been multiple years in the making, and we hope the fruits of our many labours are taken up in philosophy courses!

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

BJÖRN FRETER

This carefully edited anthology by George Matthews tackles many of the foundational questions of Western philosophy while beautifully managing to make these philosophical inquiries truly accessible to anyone who is willing to engage in them. All chapters are written to be understood; the contributors show an honest and a caring attitude towards their audience.

The anthology is refreshing in its open-mindedness and its intelligible approach. This book will help undergraduate students of philosophy—and those who teach undergraduates—to get comfortable with the way Western ethicists ask and answer foundational ethical questions.

The book is written in a jargon-free, culturally sensitive, gender-appropriate, carefully deliberate language. This is, in my opinion, of the highest importance. Students will thus be given a chance to learn through these beautiful examples from an early stage in their own intellectual biography how to address philosophical topics in a non-supremacist manner. They can adapt this attitude to their very own philosophical work and become attentive in their thinking and their philosophical language to those who were far too long ignored, rejected and dismissed in the history of Western philosophy.

The wide range of topics—from relativism to contract theory, from Natural Law Theory to feminist ethics—are approached by asking exemplary questions and devising exemplary ethical situations. This approach grounds the philosophical discourse in lived experience where it belongs. Philosophy is not presented as an intellectual prestidigitation but as an existential exercise arising from being troubled by these strangely incontrovertible questions of life.

I highly recommend this book as an introduction to those who wish to read an accessible yet rigorous and challenging approach to Western ethics!

— Björn Freter, PhD, Independent Scholar, Knoxville, TN, U.S.A. (Peer Reviewer)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

GEORGE MATTHEWS AND CHRISTINA HENDRICKS

GEORGE MATTHEWS, BOOK EDITOR

A project like this, with so many moving parts, is certainly a labor of love. I wish to thank all of the many people involved in bringing this book to fruition. First and foremost I'd like to thank Christina Hendricks for her tireless work orchestrating things as series editor and Apurva Ashok for her work as Project Manager for the Rebus Community.

The authors of course are what make this book possible, and I'd like to thank them all. They are, in the order of their chapters: Paul Rezkalla, Jeffrey Morgan, Douglas Giles, Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao, Frank Aragbonfoh Abumere, Joseph Kranak, Kathryn MacKay, and Michael Klenk. They have contributed their expertise to this effort to better serve students of philosophy with an openly and freely accessible textbook of the highest quality.

Finally I would like to thank the reviewers who patiently read through all of the chapters and contributed their helpful comments, Björn Freter and Vance Ricks, as well as all of the many contributors to the initial discussions that gave rise to this textbook on the forums of the Rebus Foundation. We all hope you enjoy this book!

CHRISTINA HENDRICKS, SERIES EDITOR

I would like to thank the authors in this book for their patience as we worked through the process of conceiving the book and getting it to publication. Because this is one of the first books to be published in the Introduction to Philosophy open textbook series, we were sometimes creating processes and workflows as we went along, and this meant things may have taken longer than anyone expected at first!

Special thanks to George Matthews, who was one of the first people to volunteer for this series as a book editor, and has been incredibly flexible, patient, and dedicated to the work all the way through. He has done an excellent job of selecting authors for chapters and helping them refine their work to result in the clear and accessible finished book.

Also instrumental to the success of this book are the peer reviewers, Björn Freter and Vance Ricks,

who volunteered their time and expertise to read through a draft of the whole book and provide constructive comments and suggestions.

Jonathan Lashley has done an amazing job with the design of the book covers for this series, using original artwork by Heather Salazar (who is the editor for the [Philosophy of Mind book in this series](#)). The book covers are exceptionally well done, and really bring the series together as a whole.

Colleen Cressman has provided much-needed help with copyediting. I am very grateful for her thorough and detailed efforts, and for the suggestions she made to help make the chapters as accessible as possible for introductory-level students. And thank you to Allison Brown for her help with inputting and formatting the content into Pressbooks so that it looks and reads well.

When I started this project there were many discussions amongst philosophers from various parts of the world on the Rebus Community platform, and their ideas and suggestions contributed significantly to the final products. There were also numerous people who gave comments on draft chapter outlines for each book. Thank you to the many unnamed philosophers who have contributed to the book in these and other ways!

This book series would not have gotten beyond the idea stage were it not for the support of the Rebus Community. I want to thank Hugh McGuire for believing in the project enough to support what we both realized at the time was probably much bigger than even our apprehensions about its enormity. Zoe Wake Hyde was instrumental in getting the project started, particularly in helping us develop workflows and documentation. And I'm not sure I can ever thank Apurva Ashok enough for being an unfailingly enthusiastic and patient supporter and guide for more months than I care to count. She spent a good deal of time working with me and the book editors to figure out how to make a project like this work on a day-to-day level, and taught me a great deal about the open publishing process. Apurva kept me on track when I would sometimes drop the ball or get behind on this off-the-side-of-my-desk project. She is one of the best collaborative partners I have never (yet!) met in person.

Finally, I want to thank my family for understanding how important this work is and why I have chosen to stay up late so many nights to do it. And for their patience on the many groggy, pre-coffee mornings that followed.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

GEORGE MATTHEWS

Is it ever acceptable to lie in order to protect someone from harm? Is selfless generosity really possible, or are we humans always in one way or another motivated by selfish concerns? Should loyalty to family, friends and one's immediate community take precedence over one's duty to obey the law? Such questions, which belong to the rich and complex domain of moral reflection, are no doubt familiar sorts of questions, even if there may seem to be no clear way of answering them with more than a shrug of the shoulders and the assertion that "it all depends..."

Moral philosophy or ethics (I am here using these terms as broadly synonymous in spite of distinctions between these terms that are sometimes made) is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the critical examination of these kinds of questions, along with the implicit assumptions and theoretical commitments that lie behind them. Ethics is a branch of philosophical value theory devoted to exploration of the broad rules which define, regulate and constrain our social lives, as well as with the more abstract consideration of moral evaluation itself. Thus it also considers such questions as whether there are general or even universal principles to which we may appeal in our attempt to negotiate particular ethical dilemmas we may face. What might such principles look like and why should we in fact follow them when they require us to set aside our impulses or interests? Are universal principles even desirable as a goal in ethical deliberation and human development?

Clearly moral reflection and deliberation lie at the core of what it means to be human, members of a species dependent upon each other and yet often unreliable and opportunistic at the same time. Nevertheless moral thinking presents us with a deep puzzle. We are all intimately familiar with moral thinking, while at the same time it may seem completely unclear how to approach it in anything but a piecemeal fashion, reliant upon received ideas, customary approaches, and gut feelings. And this is certainly not for a lack of attempts to get things right about the nature, origin, and basis of judgments about right and wrong. These go back to at least the beginning of recorded history as is evident in some of the earliest extant written artifacts, such as the stele of Hammurabi from ancient Mesopotamia and the Buddhist King Ashoka's inscriptions on pillars and boulders from the Gangetic plain in ancient India. The following chapters take up this puzzle as their authors explore some of the major theoretical approaches to moral philosophy under the conviction that we both can and should subject moral reflection to critical analysis in search of the truth (or maybe the truths) about ethics.

As a way of setting the stage for the detailed accounts of various philosophical approaches to morality and moral thinking in the following chapters, it may be helpful at the outset to distinguish between three different ways in which we might approach moral thinking. We might first of all take an approach similar to that of scientists interested in understanding and explaining some given set of phenomena. We can call such an approach “descriptive ethics” since it is concerned with describing and explaining the workings of moral deliberation as it actually takes place in the minds of real people. Although this approach serves as the starting point for some contemporary approaches to ethics (especially evolutionary and feminist approaches as discussed in the last two chapters), by and large philosophers are less interested in describing and explaining moral thinking than they are in the second of the two approaches, which more directly engages the evaluative side of the questions with which we started. That is, philosophers, unlike scientists, are interested not only in clarifying and explaining the workings of ethical thinking but also in examining the cases that can be made for particular moral principles and approaches. This “normative” or “prescriptive” side of philosophical ethics will be central to many of the chapters of this text, since they examine various philosophical arguments as to why some particular approach to ethics should in fact be the one we accept as opposed to its theoretical rivals. We may wonder, however, about the justification for this kind of partisan approach to ethics in the first place. This brings us to the third way we might approach ethics, by taking a step back from particular approaches to look at ethical thinking as such, as it relates to other aspects of our intellectual and emotional lives. That is, we might ask more abstract theoretical questions about the warrant for both rational ethical deliberation and prescriptive approaches to ethics. This “meta-ethical” approach is important not only since it addresses the place of ethics in our larger mental lives, but also as a way of addressing concerns that seem to get in the way of the normative approaches we will be exploring.

The first chapter explores the metaethical claim that, in fact, there can be no real rational deliberation about ethics, since ethical thinking is always bound by norms embedded within distinct human cultures. Here Paul Rezkalla examines the case for and against different variations on the claim that ethics is bound by norms of culture and place. In general relativism is found wanting in its strongest version as a meta-ethical theory about the limits of rational approaches to ethics, although it continues to be appealing in weaker versions for its defense of tolerance and cultural sensitivity as fundamental ethical principles.

Next, Jeffrey Morgan considers the historical and currently popular claim that ethics is rooted in religion. He does this by examining two particular approaches, that of Divine Command Theory, which insists that without the authority of a purported divine author of moral commands, such commands fail to bind human actors, and that of Natural Law Theory, which argues that a divinely created natural order of things lies at the basis of all truths concerning right and wrong human actions and decisions. Both of these approaches are found wanting, even if morality and religion remain closely allied in their concern for human and social well-being.

The third chapter, written by Douglas Giles, directly considers the question of human well-being as articulated by a family of approaches known as Virtue Ethics, as they have been developed in both Western and non-Western philosophical contexts. Unlike other approaches which focus on the rules and principles underlying ethical decision making, Virtue Ethics focuses on the actor him- or herself

and the question of what it is that makes a person's character good or bad in the conviction that ethical action is always rooted in the particularities of an individual's life and community.

In the fourth chapter, Sherry Ya-Yun Kao addresses a concern of secular rationalistic ethics, namely that of understanding the relation between the self-interest of rational individuals out for their own good and the basic rules of the social game proposed by ethics. First she considers the claims of Egoism, in its two variants of Psychological Egoism, which denies the very possibility of any action that is not selfish, and hence that ethics is impossible, and Ethical Egoism, which claims that ethical restrictions on self-interest are counterproductive since the social good is in fact best achieved by the private pursuit of personal gain. Having shown the weaknesses of these two approaches she moves on to consider the advantages and disadvantages of Social Contract approaches to ethics, which attempt to show that ethical rules and the interests of individuals bound by them can and must be in concord.

The fifth chapter, written by Frank Aragbonfoh Abumere explores the appeal of and drawbacks with an approach closely allied to Social Contract Theory, which is known as Utilitarianism and which remains one of the most influential approaches among contemporary philosophers. Utilitarianism is an attempt to articulate and defend a genuinely universal ethics which is focused on the outcomes of our actions and decisions as a measure of their moral worth.

Utilitarianism in turn is often contrasted with another attempt at a universal rationalistic ethics, developed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, as here described and critically analyzed by Joseph Kranak in the sixth chapter. Kant's ethics of duty, or deontological ethics, is based on the claim that the moral worth of an act or principle is intrinsic to that act or principle itself and has little to do with their consequences. This leads to a universalistic ethics based on an unconditional respect for autonomous agents that has been enormously influential in the development of notions of human rights, even though it remains controversial in moral philosophical and political contexts.

In the seventh chapter, Kathryn MacKay examines the influence of feminism on thinking about ethics as she explores work at the intersection of developmental psychology, feminist social and political theory, and philosophical accounts of moral thinking and deliberation. She explores the ongoing debate about the nature and influence of sex and gender on both historical ethical theories and contemporary attempts to address inequality and power in society at large.

Finally, this book ends with Michael Klenk's account of the contributions of the science of biology, especially evolutionary biology, to the development of a naturalistic ethics. Here he examines a variety of claims concerning the possibility of understanding ethical norms as rooted in our nature as animals always engaged in finding a balance between our competitive and cooperative tendencies. The debate in this chapter, as in the last, is an ongoing interdisciplinary debate, although in this case it is among contemporary philosophers, social theorists, and evolutionary biologists.

CHAPTER 1.

AREN'T RIGHT AND WRONG JUST MATTERS OF OPINION? ON MORAL RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

PAUL REZKALLA



[An Hindoo Woman throwing herself on the funeral pyre of her Husband](#) by Frederic Shoberl. In *The World in Miniature: Hindoostan* via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

Her recently deceased husband lay on the funeral pyre waiting to be lit. Hundreds of people from the nearby villages stood watching and waiting for the widow to carry out her duty of chastity to its culmination. As the pyre was lit, the woman took several steps toward it and crawled on top of her husband's corpse to embrace his neck.

The pain was excruciating, but if she dismounted then she would shame her family and probably be lynched by a mob, anyway. So she lay there.

The practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, known as suttee or sati, was commonplace in parts of India until the nineteenth century. To allow the dead man's possessions and property to pass back into the hands of his family, his widow was expected to commit suicide and fulfill her duty of chastity by immolating herself on his funeral pyre. Several cases of widows being drowned or buried alive with their dead husbands have also been recorded. This practice lasted for 2,000 years until the British outlawed it in 1829 on the grounds that it was inhumane and immoral (see Sharma 1988, 6-7).

Is suttee morally acceptable simply because it was practiced and endorsed by a culture? Are the British officials who outlawed suttee morally praiseworthy for imposing an outside standard on the native inhabitants of India and disrupting their ability to fulfill sacred social expectations? Is there a right answer to the question of whether or not suttee is morally acceptable?

This chapter deals with an important question in metaethics. Metaethics is the branch of ethics that deals with the nature of morality. It tries to answer the questions: What is morality? Is morality objective? Where does it come from? What is the relationship between moral facts, if they exist, and this physical world that we interact with? And so, before we figure out how we ought to be and live, we must first establish whether there even is such a thing as the way we *ought* to be and live in the first place. One of the most important questions in metaethics is whether there is a moral reality that obligates us regardless of our judgments, opinions, and beliefs and whether there are moral facts that are necessarily and universally true. Perhaps ethical codes are merely relative to groups of people. Perhaps there is no true and binding objective morality outside of culture, time period, and personal preferences. Is morality objective and universal? Or is it merely a matter of opinion and tradition?

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

Think of a time when you disagreed with someone about the right thing to do. Maybe it was a friend, family member, celebrity, author, or political figure. You may have felt very strongly that X is obviously the right thing to do, the better course of action, or merely the lesser of two evils. The person you were disagreeing with might have felt similarly, and perhaps provided reasons for her position as well. Both of you made claims about morality. You each believed that your own position was correct or true. But are these claims about morality true or false in the same way that historical and mathematical facts are true or false?

"George Washington was the thirteenth president of the United States of America" is a false historical claim because George Washington was not the thirteenth president of the United States of America. Why is this historical claim false? Because it goes against reality. Similarly, the question before us now is whether there is such a reality for morals. Are there moral facts that hold true regardless of what we think about them? Are there moral facts that are true in virtue of some mind-independent moral reality? Those who say yes fall into the moral realism camp. And those who say no fall into the moral anti-realism camp.

Moral realism is the position that there are mind-independent facts about ethics that are true and

binding even if we have beliefs to the contrary. For example, the moral realist would say that it is objectively wrong to rape, even if the vast majority of people and cultures believed otherwise—the truth of “rape is wrong” holds irrespective of our opinions and judgments about rape. Realists disagree about what grounds or what constitutes the truth of these moral facts, i.e. divine commands, a set of necessary facts, the nature of sentient creatures, etc. Nonetheless, realists maintain that these moral facts exist independently of our opinions and judgments.

Moral anti-realism is simply the negation of this thesis. For the anti-realist, there are no mind-independent facts about morality; morality can be constructed or is merely relative to culture. This latter version of anti-realism is the position called moral relativism and is the subject of this chapter. Moral relativism, broadly construed, is the view that ethical codes are relative to the standpoints of the peoples who embrace them. This can mean many things, which will be discussed below, but relativists typically hold that ethical truths are relative to culture, that no culture’s ethical code is superior to another’s, and that we ought not judge other ethical codes as inferior to our own. This position falls under the category of anti-realism because it denies that moral facts exist independently of us and argues instead that morality is simply a product of people and cultures.

DESCRIPTIVE RELATIVISM

The mildest and least controversial form of relativism is descriptive relativism. According to descriptive relativism, moralities and ethical codes are radically different across cultures—and we can observe this. For example, some cultures see homosexuality as immoral while others do not; some cultures think that polygamy is morally acceptable (and should even be encouraged) while others see monogamy as the moral ideal; some cultures practice slavery while others find slavery morally abhorrent, etc. This ethical diversity is not only observed and documented now by cultural anthropologists, but even ancient writers like Herodotus and some ancient Greek skeptics recognized the different ways that cultures conducted marriage, burials, military discipline, and social participation. Those who adhere merely to descriptive relativism maintain the view that moral rules are observably dissimilar across cultures. For some relativists, this suggests the falsity of moral objectivity and is used as evidence in favor of stronger versions of relativism. Not all relativists argue that descriptive relativism is evidence against moral objectivity, but relativism often starts out from the truth of descriptive relativism and makes stronger claims about moral relativity on this basis. In other words, the observation of differing moral codes across cultures does not necessarily mean that morality is relative, but some relativists use this anthropological fact as evidence for the stronger conclusions about relativism that we will look at below.

METAETHICAL RELATIVISM

The ancient writer Herodotus famously said, “Culture is king” based on his observations of disparate cultural moralities (*Histories* 3.38.4)¹. Upon observing radical differences in the ways that different cultures practiced religion, burial, household organization, and even eating preferences he concluded that no standard exists beyond a culture to prescribe good and bad behavior. Thus, culture is king.

1. See Herodotus, *The Histories*, in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Geoffrey R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-grc1:3.38.4>

Unlike descriptive relativism, metaethical relativism makes this kind of stronger claim about the nature of moral truth. Metaethical relativism says that moral truths are actually only true relative to specific groups of people. This means that whether a moral belief is true is dependent on, or *relative to*, the standpoint of the person or culture that has the belief. Someone in Singapore and someone in England can both say “It is sunny outside,” but it is possible that the claim is only true for one of them. In a similar way, metaethical relativism is the position that ethical statements are only true relative to the context that they are spoken. In other words, when someone claims that some practice, X, is moral, then the claim is true if her culture believes and lives as if X is moral. For example, if a culture holds the view that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral, then for that culture, it is true that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral. And for the culture that believes it is morally acceptable to have pre-marital sexual relations, then “having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral” is false.

Notice that this is different from saying, “Lying might be morally permissible in certain situations such as when a murderous ax-man asks you where your family is hiding.” Metaethical relativism is not about this kind of situation-specific method of determining what is moral. Rather it says that moral beliefs and claims are true or false relative to the cultures or standpoints in which they exist.

NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

Finally, we will look at the strongest kind of relativism: normative relativism. It is the strongest kind of relativism because it goes beyond descriptive and metaethical relativism and makes an even grander claim. According to normative relativism, no person or culture ought to judge the ethical codes of other cultures as being inferior, nor should any culture intervene in another culture to prevent it from carrying out the specifics of its ethical code. The normative relativist says that we might prefer the specific morality of our culture and even be able to offer reasons for doing so, but this does not imply that ours is superior to that of others. Normative relativists argue that because no objective, independent standpoint from which to evaluate ethical codes exists, no culture can justifiably say that its morality is objectively superior.

On the face of it, this might strike us as problematic for a couple of reasons. Perhaps this principle of normative relativism *itself* is only specific to our culture and does not necessarily apply to all cultures. In other words, just because my culture accepts normative relativism this does not entail that all cultures must abide by the same principle (of normative relativism) and not consider their moralities superior. However, if the normative relativist insists that this principle is true for all cultures (that no culture should judge the moralities of other cultures or consider its morality superior), then this seems like an admission of a universal value that is true across all cultures irrespective of whether or not they believe it to be true. Remember that one of the reasons for which relativists deny moral objectivity is the implausibility of the existence of universal values and moral facts that we can come to know. And yet, if the normative relativist believes that no culture should criticize the morality of another culture (and that this principle holds true for all cultures), then this is exactly the kind of universal moral fact that the relativist denies.

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL DIVERSITY

As we saw in the section on descriptive relativism, the problem of moral diversity is often used as

evidence in defense of relativism. Relativism seems to offer a better explanation of why there exists so much moral disagreement in the world. The moral disagreements also tend to be more profoundly observed *between* cultures rather than *within* cultures. For example, the relativist might point out that cultures disagree about the morality of homosexuality—homosexual practice is outlawed in a few countries and is even punishable by death in some (Bearak and Cameron 2016). Perhaps a clearer example is that of birth control. While some countries have made artificial birth control illegal, 92% of Americans think that birth control is morally acceptable and most Western nations have legalized most birth control methods (Gallup 2019; Kirk, et al. 2013). This seems to be a point in favor of relativism, for if morality is relative to cultures, then we would expect moral disagreements to be most evident and profound when comparing the ethical codes of different cultures. The more different the cultures, the more different the ethical codes.

The moral realist who holds that there are objective truths about values has two possible responses available to the problem of moral disagreement. The first response is to question the scope and profundity of the moral disagreement between cultures. Some realists argue that the differences between moralities in cultures are more due to differences in knowledge about the world than to actual moral disagreement. For example, imagine a culture that practices senicide—the authorized killing of the elderly. When an individual in the group reaches fifty years of age, they are expected to undergo a ceremonial honor killing. On the surface, this practice seems to clash with the moral sensibilities and intuitions of people who don't engage in this practice.

But suppose one learns some new information, that this group practices senicide because of its particular views about the afterlife. They believe that one lives on in the afterlife with the same body that one died with. In order to build huts, find food, and raise a family in the afterlife, then, one must not have died at such an old age as to prevent one's body from being useful for these things. For this reason, the group members ensure that their elderly will be able to successfully overcome the challenges of the afterlife by ending their lives before their bodies become decrepit.

Now, their practice of senicide is undergirded by the values of care and compassion for the elderly. Most people might be horrified by such a practice, but the disagreement here is not one of values and morals but of facts about the world. Those who are horrified may not think that the elderly live on in the afterlife with the same bodies they died with. If they did, they might not find this practice so objectionable. The objectivist could thus argue that a lot of the supposedly moral differences we observe between cultures are more like this case where the disagreement concerns non-moral facts rather than moral facts.

The objectivist's second response is to question the main assumption made by the relativist when arguing from the problem of moral diversity. The relativist's argument against moral objectivity comes in two steps: first, she assumes that if there were an objective morality, then there would not be such moral diversity and second, she then rejects moral objectivity because of the presence of moral diversity. But why should we grant this first assumption? Why should we assume that if morality is objective people will not disagree?

Suppose that I give my students a quadratic equation to solve and they all come up with different answers. Does the presence of many answers entail that there is no right answer? Of course not.

In mathematics there is often a correct answer to a problem regardless of whether or not we have it figured out. If morality works like math in this way, then that might show us that the correct moral answers are difficult to arrive at, but it certainly does not show that there is no right answer. The relativist's assumption that there would be no moral diversity if moral objectivity were true is demonstrably false.

OBJECTIONS TO RELATIVISM

Relative to Whom?

One of the difficulties with moral relativism in general is answering the question of what a culture is or what counts as an appropriate body of people for morality to be relative to or dependent on. Is a village a large enough population to have its own valid, ethical code? Or is morality only relative to national governments and the laws set by them? Perhaps moral subjectivism is the correct form of relativism, and morality comes down to the judgments of individuals with each individual subject being enough to form a moral community with an ethical code.

This is a serious problem for relativism because the concept of a culture is so vague and ill-defined that it becomes almost useless for ethical discussions. Consider the example of the early, abolitionist movement in the United States prior to the abolishment of slavery: Was it wrong for a group of people in America to hold anti-slavery views given that the majority of the country was pro-slavery and the laws reflected such beliefs? Is it wrong for minority groups in other nations to hold views contrary to popular opinion and written law? If metaethical relativism is true, then a moral claim is true if it accords with the moral view of the culture and false if it is not. This would mean that the abolitionists held a false moral view because it diverged from the view of the wider culture.

Perhaps the relativist can respond that the abolitionist movement was large enough to count as a culture, and is therefore a legitimate moral position even though it differed from the majority view in that country. But this merely pushes the question back one step further: If the abolitionists numbered only one hundred members, would this be enough to comprise a culture? What if there were only twenty? Where if there were only two? One? On what basis does the relativist define "culture" to make it significant for ethical discussion?

Some Things Just Seem Wrong

The most common responses to relativism come in the form of what is called a *reductio ad absurdum*—a form of argument meant to disprove a view by showing us the difficult or absurd (hence the name) conclusions that the view being responded to would lead to. If the consequences are sufficiently counterintuitive or ridiculous, then we are justified in rejecting the view as being false. For example, if I argued that every person ought to be a full-time physician you could respond that if everyone were a full-time physician, then there would be no full-time politicians, firefighters, police officers, teachers, humanitarian workers, builders, artists, etc. We cannot have a functioning society if my position were true. We need more than just full-time physicians to have a coherent society. Thus, my position leads to absurd consequences, and is certainly false! This next section will first look at three major problems that relativism faces.

If relativism is true, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some obviously wrong behaviors are actually morally acceptable simply because some cultures practice them. Most people today think that it is really morally wrong to burn widows on funeral pyres even though it was practiced by a large group of people at one point. The relativist's position, however, commits her to conceding that even practices like suttee, female genital mutilation, infanticide, and slavery are morally acceptable to the cultures that do not see them as immoral. And because the relativist denies that there are objective morals or values that hold universally, then there is no independent standard by which to evaluate behaviors and ethical codes.

Some relativists, like David Wong (2009), see the force of this problem and try to circumvent it by conceding that some moralities are superior because they better meet the needs of people that are consistent across all cultures. However, this attempt to rescue relativism seems to undermine relativism itself! By acknowledging that certain moralities are superior because they do a better job of helping humans flourish, the relativist has conceded that there exists at least one moral fact that is true independent of culture or standpoint, namely that human flourishing and well-being are good and we should aim to maximize them.

If the relativist thinks that this fact is true regardless of what anybody believes about it, and if the cultures whose moralities better enable human flourishing and well-being are superior to the moralities or cultures that impede human flourishing and well-being, then this admission deflates the relativist position. Acknowledging that some moralities are objectively better than others presumes that there exists some independent standard or set of facts by which we can judge moralities and ethical codes. Once the admission of some independent condition(s) is entertained then it seems that we are no longer thinking relativistically but objectively.

Relativism and Tolerance

This last point ties in with another argument put forward in favor of relativism, namely that it promotes tolerance. Admirably, the relativist wants us to approach the subject of ethics with humility and not rush to condemning behaviors that are different from ours as immoral. The idea is that if we acknowledge that no one culture's ethical code is superior to another, then our ability to practice tolerance naturally increases, for all moralities are equal. Relativism, it is argued, makes moral superiority unjustified.

However noble this might seem, it faces the same problem we previously discussed: If all moralities are equal, then why should we think that tolerance is a universal value? If relativism is true, then no ethical codes are superior, so why should we think an ethical code that promotes tolerance is better than the ethical code that ignores tolerance? By arguing that we should prefer relativism on the grounds that it better helps us promote and justify tolerance, then the relativist has conceded the existence of at least one universal value that all moralities can be judged by, namely tolerance. The presence of this universal value—this objective fact about the way we ought to live and behave—undercuts relativism, itself, for it concedes that there is at least one value that is not relative.

Moreover, tolerance is often an appropriate reaction to interacting with positions, beliefs, and behaviors that are different from our own. But are not some behaviors and moral viewpoints not worthy of tolerance? Surely it is appropriate to be intolerant of child abuse, indoctrination, slavery,

senseless violence, oppression of the vulnerable, etc. While tolerance is obviously appropriate and even necessary in some situations, intolerance, and even indignation and moral outrage, are certainly appropriate and justified in the face of evil.

No Room for Social Reform and Progress

One of the strongest objections to relativism is the idea that if relativism is true, then there can be no such thing as social reform or moral progress. If each culture's ethical code is equally good and right, then when a country changes its ethical code from being pro-slavery to being anti-slavery this moral change is merely a change rather than an improvement. Moral improvement and progress require that there be some standard toward which a society or an ethical code are approaching; they also entail that the subsequent morality is better than the prior morality, but again this is not something that can be said if relativism is true.

When the United States abolished slavery and segregation, and gave women and minorities the right to vote, its ethical code underwent a change. But to say that it underwent an improvement requires saying that enslaving African Americans, segregating Whites from Blacks, and preventing women and minorities from voting are objectively worse, morally speaking, than their opposites. Relativism cannot consistently support such a position for relativism entails precisely the opposite, namely that there are no objective standards for morality and morality is relative to communities. If a community decides that it wants to endorse X and then later decides to morally condemn X, then both moralities are equal. No morality is superior to another.

However, this seems like another bullet to bite. Relativism implies that certain instances of obvious moral improvement are merely instances of moral change rather than moral progress. William Wilberforce's work to end the slave trade in the British Empire, Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, and eventual martyrdom, dedicated to advocating equality and eliminating racism, and the countless other moral exemplars who were able to see past culture, law, and accepted custom to recognize moral truths that get buried or obfuscated over time really did help bring about moral progress. To say otherwise seems strongly counterintuitive.

CONCLUSION

Much of the relativism espoused by ordinary people admirably has its roots in the virtues of tolerance for opposing views and humility about one's own positions, and in that respect, it can be applauded. However, this kind of relativism is often endorsed without the appropriate level of critical evaluation that inevitably shows the inconsistency, unlivability, and even the immoral consequences of relativism. Such consequences include:

- Moral progress is impossible.
- Certain obviously immoral behaviors like slavery and oppression of women and minorities are morally acceptable simply because they enjoy acceptance by a culture.

It's for these reasons, among others, that according to a 2009 survey only 27.7% of professional philosophers are anti-realists with only a fraction of those endorsing relativism about ethics (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 34). Relativism clashes with much of what seems to be fundamental to the human

experience. We cringe when we recall the atrocities of American slavery, the Holocaust, and the Rape of Nanking. We see the wrongness of these atrocities like we see the rightness of $2 + 2 = 4$. Relativism suffers from several major problems and this should make us question its ability to explain the nature of morality.

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CHAPTER 2.

CAN WE HAVE ETHICS WITHOUT RELIGION? ON DIVINE COMMAND THEORY AND NATURAL LAW THEORY

JEFFREY MORGAN

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14)

“Nor come nigh to fornication/adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils).” (Sura 17:32)

Frustration with moral relativism and subjectivism motivates some thinkers to look to religion for objective and universally binding moral judgments. If we can ground morality in God, then morality will be objective, and we can determine with confidence our moral rights and obligations. Moreover, an answer to the question of why one ought to live morally will be near at hand. This chapter will examine two forms of religious morality—the Divine Command and Natural Law theories of morality. We will see that both theories run into serious challenges. In the final section, we will consider how religious belief and practice might nevertheless support living a moral life.

For the most part, this chapter concerns itself with the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which all have their origins in the prophet Abraham). Box A briefly discusses religion in non-monotheistic faiths. The Abrahamic faiths conceive of God as personal, omniscient and omnipotent. God is the creator of the universe, which depends on God for its continued existence. These faiths also deem God to have given commands, such as the command not to commit adultery. The total set of these commands is the moral code of the religion. Many people initially learn morality within religious contexts: in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, as well as in families inspired by teachings from these institutions. Often, people defer to religious authorities or traditions regarding significant moral quandaries, both in their own lives and in their societies, including abortion, capital punishment, or vegetarianism. Even in liberal societies, people often consult religious authorities on controversial practical matters. Given that religious thinkers are often professionally concerned with ethical matters, consulting them does not seem entirely misplaced. However, even if we acknowledge that religion is connected to morality, there are important issues that demand philosophical clarification.

We begin with a discussion of the Divine Command Theory of Morality (DCT), which is a metaethical

theory—a theory about the nature of ethical reasoning—that sees moral obligation as equivalent to, and dependent on, the commands of God. We will see that, despite some merits, the DCT is open to serious and persuasive challenges. We will then move onto a discussion of another form of religious ethics, the Natural Law Theory of Morality (NLT). Again, while recognizing some merits of this way of thinking of morality, we will see that it too has some serious weaknesses. Finally, we will consider some ways in which religious faith might support moral life, even if morality is not dependent on faith.

BOX A: Non-monotheistic religions and morality



[Buddha statue in Phuket](#) by rurik2de via Pixabay. License: [Pixabay](#)

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) agree that God is personal and issues commands to which we ought to conform. Not all religions accept this way of thinking; some are polytheistic, holding that there exists a plurality of gods; others do not think of the ultimate reality as personal at all. Hinduism is notoriously difficult to pin down, but some forms, such as Advaita Vedanta, think of ultimate reality as non-personal, although others, including Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita, hold to a conception of God very similar to the Abrahamic religions. Some forms of Buddhism accept the existence of gods, but Buddhism does not accept the existence of a permanent and independent god that is the source and sustainer of the universe. Daoist religions accept the existence of the Dao, which transcends personal experience, but is understood quasi-naturalistically, as a fundamental order in the universe. The variations in the non-monotheistic religions mean that it would be folly to generalize about ethics within these faiths. That said, it is clear that, lacking a personal god, the Divine Command Theory cannot apply to these religions. Furthermore, Thomas Aquinas's version of the Natural Law Theory also cannot apply, for it depends on the designed creation of the world by a personal god. Nevertheless, Daoism, Buddhism, and some forms of Hinduism, as well as some North American Indigenous religions, might be thought of as reflecting versions of Natural Law Ethics, inasmuch as they rest on alleged natural facts about the world.

THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY OF MORALITY

The Divine Command Theory of Morality (DCT) is a relatively simple theory of moral obligation that equates our moral duties to the commandments of God:

- X is morally obligatory if and only if God has commanded X.
- Y is morally prohibited if and only if God has forbidden Y.

Moreover, the DCT holds that God’s commands are the source of morality. Consider, for example, the seventh commandment, “thou shall not commit adultery.” Assuming that God exists and has indeed issued this command, then, according to the DCT, it is morally wrong to commit adultery. If God does not exist or has not issued the command, then adultery is morally permissible.

The motivation behind this theory is obvious: with its universal rules, the DCT at once solves challenges of relativism and of why one ought to be moral (some argue that the idea of an objective morality only makes sense if a personal god exists—see Box B). Furthermore, the DCT emphasizes the idea that moral commands are overriding, in the sense that they trump other motivations such as convenience or self-interest. Other theories seem deficient in these respects. For example, one might attempt to support a rule prohibiting adultery on consequentialist grounds (see [Chapter 5](#)), pointing out the likelihood that adultery leads to suffering. However, such reasons will be open to exceptions—what about situations in which suffering does not ensue? Perhaps one could reject adultery on deontological grounds (see [Chapter 6](#)), using Kantian reasons about the violation of vows and the lying that typically occurs in adultery, but these considerations might allow adultery in the case of open marriages. Another possibility is that we reject adultery on cultural grounds, seeing it as not what “we” do. The DCT, however, makes it clear that if God prohibits adultery, then it is absolutely wrong whether or not it leads to suffering, violates a cultural norm, or violates the categorical imperative. Furthermore, the DCT suggests a strong reason to act morally: morality is essentially submission to the authority of the creator, who may punish transgressors.

BOX B: The moral argument for the existence of God

The DCT tries to equate morality to the purported commands of God. Some thinkers, for instance Robert Adams (1999), argue that the existence of objective moral obligations is coherent only if a personal God exists. In other words, the idea is that objective morality either presupposes that God exists, or that the existence of God is the best explanation of objective moral obligations. Consideration of such arguments, some which can be traced to Immanuel Kant (1788), would take us too far from the central themes of this chapter. However, see Evans (2018) for a more detailed discussion of these arguments.

The DCT is interesting in that, in contrast with most other theories of ethical action, it emphasizes *obedience* or *submission* as a central virtue—not obedience in general, of course, but to God and perhaps to God’s representatives. The idea of moral autonomy, of determining the right course of action using one’s reason, is not emphasized. One does need to use reason, perhaps to determine whether an action falls under the scope of a particular commandment, but the principal virtue for the DCT is obedience to the will of God. This may for some people be attractive as it offers an escape from the weighty demands of moral judgment; one essentially transfers responsibility to a third party. One major religion reflects this idea in its very name: in Arabic, “Islam” means submission, and a “Muslim” is one who submits (to Allah).

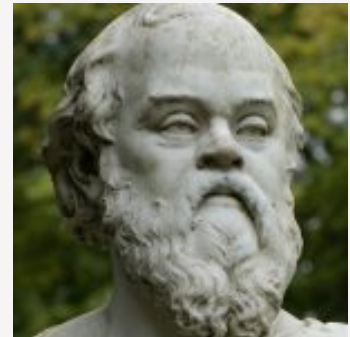
Some theists (people who believe that God exists) might think of the DCT as consistent with their overall worldview. It may seem that if God has created the world and everything that exists, then God must have created morality too. Furthermore, if God is omnipotent, then it would seem that God could choose any morality—we are just fortunate that God chose a morality that facilitates human flourishing. However, as we dig a little deeper, some serious problems appear.

Some problems arise from the application of the theory to practical decision making. How do we know what God has commanded? One of the virtues of the DCT is supposed to be its moral clarity, but the DCT is not so unequivocal as it appears. First, the DCT presupposes that we have the right religion, and also that we interpret that religion correctly. Clearly, this is going to make it very challenging to apply the DCT to issues that demand agreement with those of diverse or no faith. Second, how can we resolve issues that arise from applying ancient commands to contemporary moral problems, including problems arising from human cloning, pornography, assisted suicide, or nuclear weapons? Minimally, we will need to use our judgment to determine what the commands suggest God would have commanded, but this will render obedience less clear. Third, to make matters worse, God has issued multiple commands, sometimes leading to dilemmas in which we are commanded to do two incompatible actions. What if the only way to “honor thy parents” is to “bear false witness,” or if keeping the Sabbath holy will require violating the duty to honor thy parents? Supporters of the DCT can develop responses to these problems of application, but the cost will be that the theory will lose its simplicity, one of its chief attractions. However, even if we put these challenges aside and agree that we know that God has, for example, forbidden adultery, there remains a still more fundamental challenge to the DCT.

The challenge is sometimes called the “Euthyphro dilemma,” as it is expressed in Plato’s Dialogue *Euthyphro* (see Box C). To understand the challenge, suppose that God exists and has forbidden adultery. Then, adultery is immoral, according to the DCT. However, is adultery immoral because God forbids it? Or does God forbid adultery because it is immoral? Whatever our response, puzzles arise.

BOX C: The Euthyphro dilemma

Plato's *Euthyphro* is written from the context of polytheistic religion, and is concerned with the idea of piety or holiness, which may not be precisely the same as the idea of moral rightness or moral good. In a dialogue with Euthyphro, the participants inquire into the nature of piety. When Euthyphro suggests that piety is that of which the gods approve, Socrates (after reflection on the issue of disagreements between the various gods) asks whether X is pious because the gods approve of X, or whether the gods approve of X because X is pious. The question is a gem in philosophy: Socrates is expressing a puzzle that is often called a dilemma because neither option is satisfactory for the believer.



Socrates by [Ben Crowe](#) via Flickr.
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On the one hand, if God forbids adultery because it is immoral, then God has reasons for the command.¹ We could suppose that God is broadly consequentialist and forbids adultery because of the bad consequences to which it leads. Or perhaps God forbids adultery because it violates a promise typically made in marriage vows, a consideration that we could cast in broadly Kantian terms. Either way, if God appeals to either consequentialist or Kantian principles, it follows that theoretically at least, humans could determine that adultery is immoral without knowledge of God's commands. This response to the Euthyphro dilemma implies that the source of morality is not God's commands; while these commands may be helpful, they are logically *redundant*: our moral duties are equivalent to the commands of God, but they are not based on God's commands. Consequently, taking this stance on the Euthyphro dilemma implies that morality is logically *independent* of God.

Note that this response denies neither that God forbids adultery, nor that adultery is immoral. It rather holds that there is a *deeper* reason for the command forbidding adultery. If God applies perfect reason to determine which actions are forbidden or required, then the principles on which God relies are the ultimate source of moral obligation.

Still, we might acknowledge that human reason is often imperfect, short-sighted or overly self-interested. The consequences of our actions are often unforeseeable,² but God's omniscience permits more accurate, if not perfect, predictions of the consequences of our actions.³ So, while in one sense redundant, God's commands ought not to be ignored; they are based on superior reason and knowledge, and thus can be a more reliable source of moral knowledge than our own reason—indeed,

1. Note that the Qur'anic version of the rule against adultery (above) suggests that God forbids adultery for reasons.

2. "Cluelessness" is a well-known problem for consequentialist theories in general. See Greaves, Hilary. 2016. "Cluelessness." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116(3): 311-339.

3. There is an interesting problem of whether God has absolute knowledge of the future, if it is true that humans have free will. Theists clash on this issue.

this is known as God's *providence*. However, to respond to the Euthyphro dilemma by affirming that God forbids adultery because it is immoral effectively rejects the DCT. It would mean that God's commandments are based on morality. However, from the DCT's standpoint, this cannot be true.

On the other hand, suppose we affirm that adultery is immoral because God forbids it. Then, from our human point of view, it is objectively wrong to commit adultery, but from God's point of view, there is no moral reason to forbid adultery. If God has a reason for forbidding adultery, then we are implying the existence of another source of morality, thus bringing us back to the independence option. However, if adultery is wrong because God forbids it, then we must accept that God's commandments are *arbitrary*. God does forbid adultery, we might say, but God might as well have allowed it on special days—say, on one's birthday or on blue moons. As bizarre as these options seem, they are candidates from God's perspective. The fact that we consider these options "bizarre" is a sign that we presuppose that there are reasons for rejecting adultery that have nothing to do with God's commands.

So, the options seem to be that either God has reasons for issuing commands or God does not. If God does have reasons, then we seem to be forced to admit some deeper principles on which God's commands are based. This is the independence option. If God does not have reasons for the commands, then the commands are arbitrary. Neither alternative is attractive, thus giving us reason to reject the DCT. However, some thinkers, including Christian philosopher William Lane Craig, argue that the Euthyphro presents a false dilemma, which is the fallacy of assuming that there are just two options when in fact there are multiple options.

Craig argues that God is essentially good, meaning that goodness is part of God's nature:

There's a third alternative, namely, God wills something because He is good. What do I mean by that? I mean that God's own nature is the standard of goodness, and His commandments to us are expressions of His nature. In short, our duties are determined by the commands of a just and loving God. (Craig 2010, 135-6)

Craig is arguing that moral rules are neither independent of God, nor are they arbitrary. The command not to commit adultery is based on God's own goodness; it is therefore not arbitrary. Nor is the command independent of God, as it only through the good nature of God that the command occurs in the first place.

In response, we can note that the claim that God is the "standard of goodness" does not really escape the problem. Consider Craig's assertion that God is "just and loving." If one says this about another person, then the claim is meaningful; this person satisfies the *independent* standards of being loving and just. However, if "God's own nature is the standard of goodness," then saying that God is "just and loving" means that whatever God does would be equally just and loving. This seems to be the *arbitrariness* option, albeit in disguised form. So, it is unclear how Craig's idea presents a third option.

A stronger and more subtle response to the Euthyphro dilemma comes from the work of Robert Adams (1979), who has proposed a less extreme version of the DCT, which he calls the Modified Divine Command Theory (MDCT). Recall, the DCT holds that to say X is morally wrong is to say that God has forbidden X. This is usually understood as implying that God's commands are the source of our moral obligations. Indeed, that is how we have been considering the theory so far. However,

Adams understands the DCT as articulating the equivalence between our moral obligations and the commands of a *loving* God. Thus, to say that one must not commit adultery is to say that a loving God commands us not to commit adultery. Adams' MDCT does not insist that God's commands are the source of moral obligation. Indeed, Adams' position begins from a stance of confidence in basic moral facts, such as the wrongness of causing unnecessary suffering, arguing that the existence of a loving, intelligent God is the best explanation for those objective moral facts.

Adams' MDCT is an example of how philosophical theories respond to criticism, such as the Euthyphro dilemma. Adams accepts that the arbitrariness of God is not tolerable, but does not give up the DCT entirely. Rather, he reimagines the theory as insisting on the identity of moral rules with God's commands, but gives up the idea that the source of morality lies in the arbitrary commands of God. The strategy is promising but we should note that Adams has given up the idea that adultery, for example, is wrong *because* God forbids it.

THE NATURAL LAW THEORY OF MORALITY

The DCT is still embraced by some theistic thinkers today, often in a modified form such as Craig's or Adams'. However, many theists argue for a different conception of the relationship between God and morality. One important theistic moral tradition is the Natural Law Theory of Morality (NLT). This approach to morality does not deny that God issues commands, but instead takes morality to be implicit in God's creation of the universe and rational human beings. The idea is that the universe is created by God with everything holding a natural purpose. These purposes can be determined by careful study, using our reason. From knowledge of the proper purposes of objects, one can identify the proper ways to interact with the world and each other.

The moral theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) contains one influential version of the NLT. Aquinas derives his underlying metaphysics from Aristotle (384-322 BCE). For Aristotle, understanding any object requires knowing four aspects of it. We must know of what it is made (its *material* cause), its form (*formal* cause), how it came to be (its *efficient* cause), and its function (its *final* cause). Consider rain, for example. The material cause of rain is water; its formal cause is droplets of liquid falling from clouds; and its efficient cause is the condensation of vapor along with the force of gravity. Its final cause can be thought of as its functions of watering plants and refilling the streams and lakes from which we drink. As it turns out, science today has progressed greatly by rejecting final causes, but for centuries western science was influenced by the Aristotelian idea that in order to understand X we need to know what X is *for*. In Aristotelian terms, the function of an object will be understood as how it fulfills functions within the system to which it belongs—teeth allow us to chew food, the heart functions as a pump to circulate the blood. The NLT easily bends the idea of an object's *function* into its *purpose*, which further suggests how it ought to be used. Briefly, there are three components of this approach to morality:

1. God created the universe, including human beings and other objects, with purposes.
2. The purpose of objects in the world can be discerned using natural reason, with which God has endowed human beings.
3. The purpose for which God created an object determines its proper use.

The upshot is that our capacity to discern God's purposes in creation provides us with awareness of our ethical obligations. One of the strengths of the NLT is that it allows us to perceive God's purposes without knowing God's commands, or even believing that God exists.

For example, our reason allows us to identify that our sexual organs have the function of reproduction of our species. Indeed, for Aquinas, something can have just one final cause. So, reproduction is why God provided our sexual organs to us. If sexual organs are created solely in order to fulfill reproductive needs, then it would be wrong to use them for other purposes. In general, sex for pleasure becomes problematic, but especially so when reproduction is either impossible or thwarted; thus, homosexual acts, mechanical or chemical birth control, and masturbation are all ruled out on this account. These acts constitute use of sexual organs in ways that could not lead to reproduction. If we add the insight that marriage functions to provide a legitimate outlet for sexual needs and as a space for rearing children, then it will be clear that adulterous sex will also be wrong.

Aquinas's version of the NLT is clearly theistic, as it presupposes the existence of an intelligent designer of the universe who has endowed us with the capacity to discern the natural law. However, it does not suggest that acts are right or wrong according to God's arbitrary commands. Instead, it takes the position that when God commands us to do X, it is because X is right. Further, we do not need to believe in God in order to know what is right or wrong. Anyone, theist or not, is able to identify the laws of nature that govern morality, because these are implicit in nature itself. Why then would God give us commandments?

One reason is that God is able to infallibly identify the consequences of our actions. Human beings can predict the consequences of our actions ("if I shoot the gun at the man, then he will probably be killed"), but God's omniscience implies *infallible* prediction. God even will be able to anticipate the consequences of our actions into the afterlife. Also, while God's reasoning is impeccable, our own reasoning is subject to error, so we can use God's commands as a failsafe that reliably allows us to determine the right course of action. So, if God has commanded us to do X, then under the NLT we should do X.

Still, the NLT is problematic. First, it presupposes a model of explanation at odds with today's successful scientific reasoning. Science can proceed without identifying purposes in nature. Indeed, the onset of the scientific revolution is dependent on rejecting insistence on Aristotelian final causes. It is true that there are examples of functionalist reasoning in some areas of the life and human sciences—as when we say that the heart serves as a pump, but there is a significant difference between an object's function and its purpose. The latter idea presupposes an intelligence that creates or guides the object in question. Second, the idea of an object's function is not as clear as the theory suggests. Even if we allow that sex is for reproduction, it does not follow that it is *only* for reproduction, or that it could not be used for other purposes. Sex could be used to enhance intimacy, or perhaps just as a form of amusement, even if we allow that it also has the function of reproduction. Some proponents of the NLT will respond to this line of thinking in interesting ways, developing, for example, a doctrine of double effect (see Box D).

Box D: The Doctrine of Double Effect

The Doctrine of Double Effect was originally proposed by Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* (II-II, Qu. 64, Art.7) in his defense of killing another person in self-defence. The basic idea is that it is okay to kill an attacker in self-defence, providing that one does not intend to kill—the killing must be a side-effect of one’s action, not its intention. This doctrine is often applied in cases of end-of-life care, where perhaps one acts in order to alleviate pain in a patient, but the action has the foreseeable, albeit unintended, consequence of causing the death of the patient. See McIntyre (2014) for a discussion of this doctrine.

A third and decisive challenge to the NLT is that it commits the *naturalistic fallacy*. British philosopher G. E. Moore (1873-1958), who introduced the term, argues that it is fallacious to infer claims about what is good or right (moral properties) from claims about natural properties (Moore [1903] 2004). Moore specifically offered the inference from something being pleasurable to it being good as an example. Earlier, David Hume (1711-1776) argued that claims about what ought to occur cannot be inferred from claims that describe the world; we cannot infer an “ought” claim from purely “is” claims (Hume [1739] 2009). The important differences between Hume’s and Moore’s positions need not detain us too much here; what we need to note is that the NLT would have us describe the world in purely naturalistic terms, then infer something about how the world ought to be. We observe, for example, that sex has an essential role in reproduction, then infer something about the *proper* role of sex. If either Hume or Moore are correct, such inferences are illegitimate, because the conclusions of our inferences include concepts that are not implicit in the premises. The challenge, in Moore’s terms, is that the NLT implies that goodness or rightness are natural properties, whereas in fact they are properties of an altogether different type.

RELIGIOUS MORALITY

So far, we have been considering the relation between God and the *content* of our moral obligations, the actual rules governing what actions we ought to perform. However, even if we conclude that our moral duties are independent of religious belief, we could still insist that religious faith contributes to living a moral life. In other words, religious practice might support our moral life in ways that are independent of determining how we ought to act.

An obvious point is that fear of divine punishment provides a powerful motivation for doing the right thing. Clearly, if the only reason one does not succumb to the temptation to murder is one’s fear of hell, then we can be glad that one has those religious beliefs! However, it seems that morality requires doing the right thing *for the right reason*,⁴ so we might want to insist that such action is not truly moral action.

More interestingly, faith and religion are more complex than simple adherence to a set of doctrines. Usually, religions are social institutions that have long histories that include stories of moral heroes (saints, prophets, etc.) contributing to our moral understanding. Furthermore, religions usually provide moral codes that enjoin us to proceed beyond the customary demands of the morality of

4. See Kant (1785) 2002, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* for a defense of this idea (also discussed in [Chapter 6](#)).

the times, as when the Qur'an advises us to seek knowledge (Sura 20:114) or appreciate diversity (Sura 49:13). The Buddha advises us to develop compassion, and Christ demands that we love our neighbour; Guru Nanak insists on women's equality from the beginnings of the Sikh faith. Even if adherents often fall short of these ideals, the ideas encourage us to move beyond what has been typically expected of people—in some cases, helping us to reconceive our moral relationships to those who have traditionally been left out of our moral thinking.

We should also recognize that as social institutions, religions provide support for others, both within and without the religion. Religions offer charities that support poverty alleviation, such as World Vision or the Aga Khan Foundation. These same charities offer opportunities for the adherent to make a moral difference in the world. Such voluntary work permits the individual to develop moral sensitivity and even courage. It will often allow the adherent to escape from the self-centeredness that so epitomizes much contemporary life. Indeed, the great twentieth-century philosopher of religion John Hick (2005) thinks of religions as mainly concerned with providing means by which we move beyond self-centeredness.

Another interesting idea to consider is what Robert Adams (1979) calls the problem of “demoralization” without religion. Adams, drawing on some enigmatic ideas from Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* ([1793] 1960), suggests that the moral agent needs to have a sense that her moral actions will be effective—“contribute to a good world-history”—but this presupposes “a moral order of the universe.” Such an order, he argues is best, but not exclusively, offered by a theistic religious belief.

The idea is that the world presented to us by contemporary scientific understanding is a morally indifferent world, in which the agent has no guarantee that things will work out in the end, that one's moral efforts are not in vain. Such a world is demoralizing inasmuch as it leads to questions about the point of moral life. The world presented to us by most theistic religions is one in which moral life will, ultimately at least, lead to a better world, for oneself as well as others. As such, religions make the sacrifices, demands and frustrations of moral life more attractive.

In response, we can agree with Adams that religion might make moral life more attractive for some people but insist that his argument does not support the stronger position that living morally demands religious faith. Quite clearly, there are millions of people who live moral lives without the assurance of a moral order in the universe brought about by religion.

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CHAPTER 3.

HOW CAN I BE A BETTER PERSON? ON VIRTUE ETHICS

DOUGLAS GILES

This chapter explores a variety of approaches to the question of moral virtue and what it means to be a good person. It examines four ethical systems that revolve around the concept of virtue: Aristotle's virtue ethics, Aquinas's Christian version of Aristotelian virtue ethics, Buddhist virtue ethics, and Daoist and Confucian virtue ethics. Each will be presented as a different way of understanding what it might mean to live as a good person. For Aristotle, this is to be understood in terms of striving for the mean between extremes in the context of a well-ordered political community. For Aquinas, it is to be understood within the context of Christianity and natural law. For Buddhism, virtue is understood in terms of a life oriented toward the eightfold path that leads to the end of suffering. For Chinese philosophy, both Daoist and Confucian, virtue means being in harmony with the Cosmic Dao.

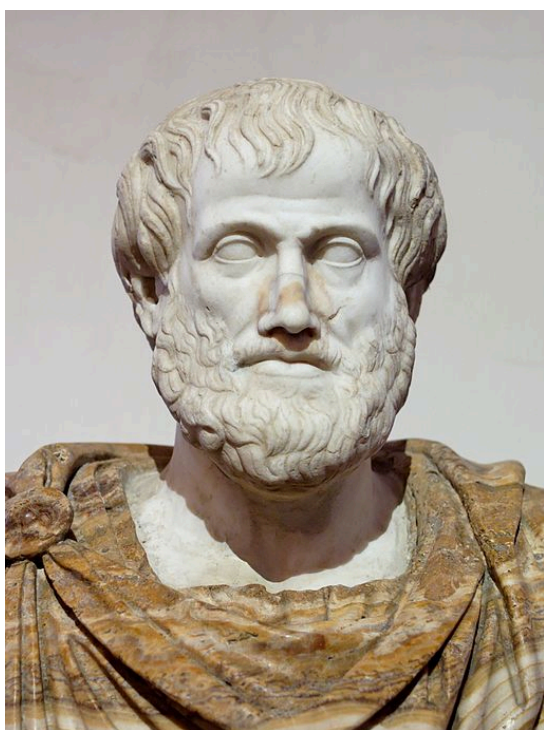
WHAT IS VIRTUE ETHICS?

In philosophies of virtue ethics, rather than an emphasis on following rules, the emphasis is on developing oneself as a good person. It is not that following rules is not important; it is more the sense that being ethical means more than simply following the rules. For example, given an opportunity to donate to a charity, deontologists (see [Chapter 6](#)) would consider whether there is an ethical rule that required them to donate. Utilitarians (see [Chapter 5](#)) would consider whether a donation would produce better consequences if they donated than if they did not. Virtue ethicists would consider whether donating is the kind of action that a virtuous person would do. Another example would be deciding whether to lie or tell the truth. Rather than focus on rules or consequences, virtue ethicists ask what kind of person do they want to be: honest or dishonest? Virtue ethicists place more importance on being a person who is honest, trustworthy, generous and other virtues that lead to a good life, and place less importance on one's ethical duty or obligations. A common theme among virtue ethicists is stressing the importance of cultivating ethical values in order to increase human happiness. Businesses today increasingly incorporate virtue ethics in their work culture, often having a "statement of values" guiding their operations.

Because the right ethical action depends on the particularities of individual people and their particular situations, virtue ethics links goodness with wisdom because virtue is knowing *how* to make ethical

decisions rather than knowing a list of general ethical rules that will not apply to every circumstance. Virtue ethicists tend to reject the view that ethical theory should provide a set of commands that dictate what we should do on all occasions. Instead, virtue ethicists advocate the cultivation of wisdom and character that people can use to internalize basic ethical principles from which they can determine the ethical course of action in particular situations. Virtue ethicists tend to see ethical principles as being inherent in the world and as being discoverable by means of rational reflection and disciplined living. The different forms of virtue ethics may or may not focus on God as the ultimate source of ethical principles. What unites the various forms of virtue ethics is the focus on moral education to cultivate moral wisdom, discernment, and character in the belief that ethical virtue will manifest in ethical actions.

ARISTOTLE ON EXCELLENCE AND FLOURISHING



[Photograph of Aristotle bust](#) by [Jostrow](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) believed that to understand something we need to understand its nature and proper function (see [Chapter 2](#)). He also believed that everything has an end, or goal, toward which it naturally moves. For example, a seed grows into a tree because the purpose and function of the seed is to grow into a tree. Objects fulfill their purpose, not out of conscious desire, but because it is in their nature to fulfill their functions. Aristotle believed that our purpose is to pursue our proper human end, *eudaimonia*, which is best understood as human flourishing or living well. *Eudaimonia* is not momentary pleasure but enduring contentment—not just a good day but a good life. Aristotle said that one swallow does not make a summer, and so, too, one day does not make one blessed and happy. It is human nature to move toward *eudaimonia* and this is the purpose, function, or final goal (*telos*) of all human activity. We work to make money, to make a home, and we sacrifice to improve our future, all with the ultimate aim of living well.

Human flourishing means acting in ways that cause your essential human nature to achieve its most excellent form of expression. Aristotle held that a good life of lasting contentment can be gained only by a life of virtue—a life lived with both *phrónesis*, or “practical wisdom,” and *aretē*, or “excellence.” Aristotle defines human good as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that

we take the characteristic activity of a human being to be a certain kind of life; and if we take this kind of life to be activity of the soul and actions in accordance with reason, and the characteristic activity of the good person to be to carry this out well and nobly, and a characteristic activity to be accomplished well when it is

accomplished in accordance with the appropriate virtue; then if this is so, the human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (1.7)¹

The ethical demand on us is to develop our character to become a person of excellent ethical wisdom because, from that excellence, good actions will flow, leading to a good life. Virtuous actions come from a virtuous person; therefore, it is wise to focus on being a virtuous person.

For Aristotle, ethics is a science with objective rational principles that can be discovered and understood through reason. Whether a particular course of action is good or not, and whether a person is good or not, are ideas that can be understood objectively. The cultivation of virtue must be accompanied by a cultivation of rationality. Aristotle saw the human soul as having three components: the nutritive part, responsible for taking in nutrition; the sensitive and appetitive part, responsible for sensing and responding to the environment, including the desires and appetites that motivate actions; and the rational part, responsible for practical and productive intellect. All three components are essential to being a human, but they exist in a clear hierarchy, with the faculties of reason at the top; these can and should control and guide the appetites into productive and ethical actions. Aristotle characterizes the desiring and emotional part of the soul as partaking of reason insofar as it complies with reason and accepts its leadership. The person of good virtue has cultivated a stable soul that is not swayed by appetites or desires but is governed by reason. Being ethical, then, is a skill that one develops. Just as you can through practice become good at math or playing a musical instrument, you can through practice become a virtuous person. When you have reached a certain level of skill in math or playing music, you no longer need a teacher to guide you, and you quickly can understand what to do. The same is true in Aristotle's conception of ethical decision making—it becomes an ingrained habit.

How can the rational human come to understand what proper ethical actions are? Aristotle's answer is his doctrine of the mean, or the balanced course of action:

Virtue is a state of character concerned with a choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6)

We see here Aristotle's emphasis on a virtuous character that enables us to make a rational ethical choice. There are two important aspects of this. The first is the concept of the choice lying in a mean relative to our circumstances, and the second is that what the mean is in any particular situation can be determined by the person of practical reason. The ethical course of action is relative to our particular circumstances, meaning that there is not one rule that fits all situations, but the ethical course of action is objectively true in that any rational person looking at the situation will be able to understand the correct ethical course of action.

By the mean, Aristotle refers to something midway between two extremes. The virtuous act is the one that falls between the extremes of what is deficient and what is excessive relative to the situation.

1. References to Aristotle are formatted using the book and chapter of the text. This citation, for example, corresponds to Book 1, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

All of the moral virtues are a mean between harmful extremes (too little, too much) in our actions and emotions:

Sample virtues as means between extremes

Too Little	Mean (Virtue)	Too Much
Cowardice	Bravery	Foolhardiness
Stinginess	Generosity	Profligacy
Self-ridicule	Confidence	Boastfulness
Apathy	Calmness	Short-Temperedness

Sometimes the mean lies closer to one extreme than the other because of the particular circumstances involved. Because situations are different, it is not sufficient to say, “Be brave” because the mean of bravery differs from situation to situation. There are still ethical standards, but they are relative to the situation. It is always wrong to eat too much, but “too much” will be different for each individual. That is why an emphasis on virtue—the ability to discern *how* to make ethical decisions—is the key to an ethical, good, and balanced life that is worth living.

The better you are at finding and acting on the mean, the more you have *phrónesis* (“practical wisdom”). This form of practical reason helps one recognize which features of a situation are morally relevant and how one can do the right thing in practice. Practical reason is rational because it is open to rational influence. Again, virtue is a learned skill. A person who listens to and learns from the reason of others is a rational person, and the same holds for ethics. As Aristotle sees it, every thought that one has, and action that one takes, contributes to the development of either a virtue or a vice. Virtues such as temperance, courage, and truthfulness become increasingly a part of our actions the more we intend to do them and the more we practice doing them. The truly virtuous person:

- Knows what she or he is doing.
- Chooses a virtuous act for its own sake.
- Chooses as a result of a settled moral state.
- Chooses gladly and easily.

These are possible only through developing a virtuous disposition in which the soul is settled by reason. The more you practice virtue, the more you are capable of virtue because virtue becomes a way of life. Leading an objectively rational good life will produce a subjectively happy life of the kind appropriate to being human.

THOMAS AQUINAS ON VIRTUE

Most of Aristotle's writings were lost to Western Europe up until the twelfth century. When Islam spread across Egypt, the Levant, and Persia in the seventh century, libraries of old Greek writings were found, including works of Aristotle lost to the Latin-speaking world. Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rush (Averroes), and other Islamic thinkers recognized the value of Aristotle and wrote commentaries on his works and other works extending his philosophy. Those Islamic works were discovered by Christians when they conquered central Islamic Spain in the mid-twelfth century. Like their Islamic counterparts a few centuries earlier, Christian scholars knew what they had in the Islamic libraries. Works by Aristotle (who the Christian scholars knew from his logic books) were eagerly translated into Latin and distributed widely.

Aristotle's texts posed problems for Christian philosophers in reconciling them with Christian theology, which led to many arguments within the thirteenth-century Catholic Church. Enter Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who wrote the *Summa Theologia* (The Sum of Theological Knowledge), creating a system that could, as advertised, provide answers to all questions. Aquinas's philosophy was based on the writings of Aristotle, who he reverently called "The Philosopher" and placed as a source of truth almost on the same level as the Bible. You will see similarities between Aristotle's and Aquinas's ethical systems.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas based ethics on the pursuit of our proper human end. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas believed that our proper human end of *eudaimonia* is not found in this world. Aristotle's system, Aquinas believed, was as good as humans could achieve on the basis of the natural realm, but our end as humans is to be perfected through union with God. For Aquinas, every event occurs because there is some end toward which things are directed, and we humans, like everything else in the universe, have our own ends. Unlike everything else, we as humans can consciously choose which ends we pursue, and ethics concerns which ends are worth our efforts to pursue. Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that ethical understanding comes through virtue and that virtue is a skill that must be developed. Also like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that we learn what is ethical through our reason, which we can use to uncover God's natural law that is imbued in creation. By rationally reflecting on what is in accord with nature and our own natural inclinations, we can understand the ethical virtues.

Aquinas's Aristotelian idea that humans can rationally understand ethical principles had to deal with the Christian concept that humanity's sinful nature prevented such understanding. He held that sin



[Saint Thomas Aquinas](#) by Carlo Crivelli via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the Public Domain.

affects our moral life but not our rational life, clearing the way for the use of our human intellect to learn ethical truths. He borrowed from Islamic philosophers the conception that intellect is both passive and active. Intellect passively takes in sense experience and ideas but actively processes them to abstract universal truths. This is a natural process that is inherent in the human mind without requiring illumination from God and that is unaffected by sin (as was commonly taught in Aquinas's time). The universals abstracted by the mind from multiple individuals (e.g., "triangle" can be abstracted from individual triangles) are tied to real features in the world, the universals created by God and first existing in the mind of God, who used them to create the objects in the world. Put simply, we use our intellect to understand the world God has created. It is an orderly and purposeful world, with all of the objects in it receiving their purpose from God. By observing the world and reflecting on our observations, we can learn about the natural world, including God's ethical laws, which permeate the natural world. Aquinas used this conception to develop what we now know as "natural law"—the idea that ethical truths are ingrained in nature (see [Chapter 2](#) for more on Aquinas's view of natural law).

To be virtuous, we need to learn God's natural law that governs the motion of objects in nature and instructs us in ethical behavior. To be rational, which is central to our human ends, requires intellectual discipline, but it is the way to virtue. Through self-discipline and reflecting on the natural law, we learn and develop as ingrained habits the four cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, prudence, and justice. Virtuous persons practice the four cardinal virtues in their daily lives, and from those virtues flow ethical behaviors in all situations.

BUDDHIST VIRTUE ETHICS

Buddhism is a spiritual and philosophical tradition founded by Siddhārtha Gautama in India in the fifth century BCE. There are many schools of Buddhist thought in many countries, from monasteries devoted to religious ritual devotion to solitary practitioners of meditative practices. A common thread among most Buddhist schools of thought is an emphasis on a virtue ethical system that teaches the art of becoming balanced and harmonious through humility, with the goal of being free from *dukkha*, or suffering or anguish. We can free ourselves from suffering by extinguishing hatred and ignorance, following the teaching of the founder of Buddhism, Siddhārtha Gautama, who became "Buddha," which means "the Awakened One." Siddhartha Gautama taught that what could be called evil acts are performed out of ignorance and fear; therefore, rules and threats of punishment do not curtail these acts. We learn how to act in a suitable way (*sammā*, meaning best or most effective in the circumstances) by focusing on thinking suitably because our thoughts lead to our actions. The emphasis in Buddhism is on what is suitable and unsuitable rather than on the Western sense of right and wrong or good and evil. A life of virtue is outlined by the eightfold path: suitable view, intention, mindfulness, concentration, effort, speech, bodily conduct, and livelihood. By making one's thoughts and actions suitable, one promotes positive outcomes and lessens harmful outcomes. This is especially important to Buddhists because of the Gautama's teaching about karma, a concept that underlies Buddhist ethics and differs significantly from the divine command ethics found in many religions.

The idea of karma is that it is a natural phenomenon that we can think of similarly to how we think of the laws of physics. The law of karma says that thoughts and actions that intend to harm others will eventually cause harm to ourselves and that thoughts and actions that intend to benefit others

will eventually benefit us. In the Buddhist conception of time, “eventually” could mean in a future life that is multiple reincarnations away, so Buddhists think less in terms of immediate consequences of thoughts and actions and more in terms of the intrinsic value of them. Karma is not a strict determinism in that we still have free will and can mitigate the consequences of karma through our virtuous thoughts and actions. To avoid future suffering in this life or future lives, a Buddhist focuses on developing inner virtue to be able to think and act suitably in order to avoid negative karma, and to generate positive karma. As with Aristotle’s virtue ethics, the more you practice virtue, the more you are capable of virtue. Having made a commitment to follow the eightfold path as a way of life, you are disposed to follow those rules.

CHINESE VIRTUE ETHICS

For more than two millennia, Chinese philosophy has been dominated by two great traditions, Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism), that have influenced China throughout its history and are important to Chinese culture still to this day. Both traditions are founded on their teaching of the *Dao*, which is best translated as “the way.” Dao is both noun and verb, both how the universe is and how things behave properly. The Dao cannot be described completely in words but can be sensed as the source of all things and the rhythm of Being. All things come from Dao, and all things have their own Dao, or essence, which comes from the Cosmic Dao. Adepts of both Confucianism and Daoism believe that to be in the Dao and in harmony with it is to be virtuous and at peace, and that this state of enduring harmony with the Dao, similar to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, is the proper human goal. Both Confucianist and Daoist ethical systems teach that a community flourishes when its members are in harmony with the Dao, and that the state flourishes when its leaders are in harmony with the Dao. However, Confucianism and Daoism are in disagreement about how communities and governments can keep in harmony with the Dao and, thus, promulgate different ideas about how to attain virtue.



[Confucius](#). In *Half Portraits of the Great Sage and Virtuous Men of Old (Yuan Dynasty)* via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

Confucianism is the social and ethical system set down by Kongzi (Master Kong) (c. 551-479 BCE), known in the West as Confucius. Kongzi saw the virtuous person as an artistic creation achieved through the diligent practice of ethical excellence by way of strict ritual practice. Ritual, or *Li*, is the art and practice of crafting one's character from the raw material of human nature. Just as a craftsman uses tools to fashion wood or stone, a person uses ritual behaviors to carve and polish his or her character. *Li* extends to all aspects of life; Kongzi taught that our every action affects our character and our environment, so every activity needs to be performed with the proper respect and procedures. Kongzi issued hundreds of rites in sayings covering many aspects of human life, how youth should behave toward their parents, what colors of clothing one should wear and when, how one should greet another person, protocols that should be observed at the court of the ruler, and so on—all to be strictly observed in order to cultivate the comprehensive ethical virtue known as *Ren*.

Most of the rites specified by Kongzi concern human interactions, reflecting the great importance he placed on suitably respecting one's superiors. Ancient Chinese society was highly stratified, and Kongzi thought that maintaining the social hierarchy was essential to social order. Showing respect for one's superiors, such as government officials, elders, and ancestors, was more than polite; it was essential for society to function properly. Filial piety was more than respecting your family elders dead or alive; it was the fundamental building block of social harmony and justice. The more one practiced the rites, the more one developed virtue, most importantly the virtue of *Ren* or benevolence. *Ren* should be understood not as acts of kindness but as acts of propriety that create virtue in oneself and society. Practicing the rites virtuously brings each person and society in harmony with the Dao and leads to a good life for all.

The philosophy of Daoism has long provided a strong counterpoint to Confucianism. As the name implies, Daoism focuses on harmony with the Dao rather than on human teachings, the opposite of the Confucian emphasis on a system of ritual behavior. Daoist ethics centers on the fundamental virtue of *wu wei*, meaning "effortless action." Daoism rejects formal ritual and deliberately striving for virtue, emphasizing instead that virtue comes from naturalness, simplicity, and spontaneity. Daoism at times seems to be anti-civilization with its calls for us to detach from the artificiality of social traditions and rituals and to adopt instead a quiet life communing with nature. At other times, though, Daoism attempts to reform society, especially its leaders:

If you want to be a great leader, you must learn to follow the Dao. Stop trying to control. Let go of fixed plans

and concepts and the world will govern itself. The more prohibitions you have, the less virtuous people will be. (Laozi [ca. 400-250 BCE] 1991, Chapter 57)

The Daoist idea is that separating ourselves from nature is separating ourselves from the Dao and that what most contributes to this separation from the Dao are the social institutions of government, military, and other social hierarchies and power structures. The Daoist virtue of *wu wei* involves a life of walking away from the artificial trappings of human pretension and arrogance and shaping your actions according to what others think of you. Instead, a Daoist seeks a oneness with the rhythms of nature, which probably requires walking away from society itself. Deliberately, Daoism does not provide a set of rules and rituals because central to Daoist philosophy is the idea that ritual does not cultivate virtue. Instead, Daoism provides guidelines on cultivating the virtues of selflessness, moderation, detachment, and humility. Accordingly, Daoist philosophers did not publish books detailing ritual practices like Confucians did. Instead, Daoists created poetry and stories that show Daoist sages teaching about and exemplifying these virtues.

OBJECTIONS TO VIRTUE ETHICS

There are two main objections to virtue ethics as an ethical system: its vagueness and its relativism.

First, virtue ethics is too vague and subjective, and does not produce explicit rules for moral conduct that can tell us how to act in specific circumstances. When facing ethical dilemmas, we feel better if we have a clear answer about what to do. Virtue ethics offers general ideals rather than definitive commands. We can create laws based on a definitive ethic against stealing, but we cannot make laws saying “be wise” or “be patient.” Also problematic is that virtue ethics tends to hold that its virtues apply variably according to the situation. It is far easier to practice the principles of never lying or always being generous. Virtue ethics says there are times when lying is a better course of action and being generous is a worse course of action, and this variability creates uncertainty. What is more, how can I decide when the virtue applies and when it should not? Telling me to be wise and reflect on the ethical virtues and the situation is offering more vagueness. Finally, we want to be able to rely on other people’s behavior, and those who practice virtue ethics may vary in their behavior, so we may not know exactly where we stand with them.

To consider this objection, we need to think about the nature of ethics itself. Yes, we could say definitively, “You should not lie” and “you should not steal.” But what are those prohibitions based on? A virtue ethicist could respond by arguing that both are based on the ethical principle of honesty and that if that is so, then cultivating the virtue of honesty will lead one not to lie or steal from others. A virtue ethicist would also say that virtue ethics focuses on the foundation of ethical life encapsulated in objective reason (Aristotle), God’s natural law (Thomas), the law of karma (Buddhism), or the Dao (Confucianism or Daoism), and therefore virtue is not entirely variable. Virtue ethics provides us with the tools to make ethical decisions in the varying circumstances of our daily lives. The variability in the behavior of those who practice virtue ethics reflects the variability of everyday life.

Second, there are different cultural definitions of human flourishing and virtue. All human cultures have ethical values, but values vary across cultures. So how can we decide which set of virtues is right? Even within a culture, two people will have different views about what the virtues are, and when and

how they apply. Because virtue ethics gives us no specific commands for how to act, each person is left to himself or herself to decide how to act. Virtue ethics is too relative to be a helpful ethical theory.

Ethical relativism is a concern. If ethics means anything, it has to have some objective basis and cannot be left entirely up to arbitrary whim. Virtue ethicists are aware of this danger and would respond to it that virtue ethics is based on objective realities of the world and human nature. The virtues are manifestations of how things are, or should be, outside of cultural or individual subjectivity. Different cultures differ on how ethical virtues should be applied, but every culture values fundamental virtues such as honesty, benevolence, courage, and justice. Differences in how cultures apply virtues may reflect objective differences in their circumstances. When we interact with another culture, those differences do need to be dealt with, but saying our culture is completely right and the other culture wrong is not a helpful approach. Individuals similarly face the burden of needing to determine how best to apply the virtues, and needing to deal with conflicts with others over how they think is best to apply the virtues. But is this not similar to the decisions we have to make in all aspects of our lives?

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CHAPTER 4.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? ON EGOISM AND SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

YA-YUN (SHERRY) KAO

An egoist is known for their big ego. They are self-centered and care little about others. If you google the phrase “egoist,” almost all web pages that pop up teach you how to deal with them if you are so unfortunate as to encounter one. Given such negative connotations, it might surprise you to learn that some philosophers who are called “ethical egoists” argue that to act morally is to maximize one’s self-interest. At least on the surface, being ethical is not all about seeking self-interest. Morality requires us, for example, to keep promises, to treat others fairly, and to benefit those in need. It demands that we act not in our self-interest even if we can get advantages by breaking promises, treating others unfairly, or not helping the needy. Why then should we follow ethical norms that restrict our choices? What exactly is the relationship between ethics and self-interest?

This last question is the central question that we will focus on in this chapter. We will see how three different views, known as psychological egoism, ethical egoism, and social contract theory, address this question. Before we dive into details about each theory, here is a rough picture: Psychological egoism claims that true altruistic behavior is nothing more than wishful thinking because everything we do *is by definition* self-serving. Ethical egoism goes a step further, arguing that even if we could be unselfish, we can ignore any demand that ethics makes on us because we *should* put ourselves first. Finally, social contract theory claims that ethics itself is rooted in self-interest, that is, that we should really take others into account but only, ultimately, because doing so is in accord with what we want and need for ourselves.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Psychological egoists argue that everything we do is self-serving even if we might think it is not. Self-sacrificial behaviors, such as using oneself as a human shield to protect others in a mass shooting, cannot disprove psychological egoism, because people who sacrifice themselves are not motivated by altruistic concern. Rather, they simply do what they most want to do. Sacrificing one’s life happens to be what one most wanted to do in those circumstances. Given that doing what one most wants to do is in one’s self-interest, one’s “self-sacrificing” behavior is again egoistic. Altruism is nothing but an illusion.

However, if doing what I am motivated to do is always self-serving, then trivially there is a sense in which all my actions are self-serving. To avoid this charge, an egoist needs to avoid interpreting psychological egoism as saying that, whatever the action one intends to do, it is always self-serving by definition. Perhaps a better strategy for a psychological egoist is to emphasize one does an action X always *in order to* further one's self-interest. We act only *for the sake of* promoting our own best interest.

Many philosophers agree that the ultimate goal of one's action is to further one's best interest; what they disagree on is how to understand the idea of "one's best interest." Aristotle (384-322 BCE), for example, argues that *eudaimonia* (his term for the "happiness" that arises from a completely fulfilled life) is a rational agent's ultimate goal. Stoics, on the other hand, argue for virtuous or excellent activities without pleasure. Still others, like Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), argue that the ultimate goal of one's actions is to realize oneself or develop oneself. To make this idea appealing, an egoist must flesh out the idea of self-realization or self-development, which in turn involves specifying what is *ideal* to pursue.

Max Stirner (1806-1856) proposes that the ultimate goal of one's action is self-governance and to achieve it one need *not* take others' interests into consideration.¹ To Stirner, "I" is absolute: "For me, you are nothing but—my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you. We have only one relation to each other, that of *usableness*, of utility, of use. We owe each other nothing, for what I seem to owe you I owe at most to myself" (Stirner [1844] 1995, 263). If you accept the psychological egoist view that one's ultimate goal is always one's own self-interest, Stirner's picture of human interaction may not surprise you. Any moral obligation to others is subject to one's own self-interest. As he puts it, "one must break faith, yes, even his oath, in order to determine himself instead of being determined by moral considerations" (210). Acting for the sake of another person's interest is impossible.

One of the chief objections to psychological egoism is that it is an example of a non-falsifiable theory. It is very unlikely that one can know for certain how much one's own motivation is of egoistic concern or of altruistic concern. This difficulty has to do with the fact that one can hardly know *for sure* about one's own deep-down motivation. It can work in both ways. On the one hand, it gives psychological egoists an opportunity to argue that even a person who emphasizes that she does charity for an altruistic reason might, deep down, deceive herself. On the other hand, precisely because it is difficult to be certain about one's own deep-down motivation, psychological egoists' assumption that deep down we are all self-serving seems unwarranted. A recent empirical study even challenges the dichotomy between egoism and altruism by showing that people who are capable of expressing extreme altruism are labeled high in narcissism (White, Szabo, and Tiliopoulos 2018).

Here are the key take-away points: psychological egoists attempt to persuade us that we can never be truly altruistic and hence a truly realistic account of human behavior would have no place for anything remotely resembling ethics, if "ethics" requires us, at least sometimes, *not* to pursue our own self interest. But given that we hardly can know for sure our own deep-down motivation, we might still be altruistic. Ethical egoism, on the other hand, argues that even if we can, we *should* not be altruistic.

1. Whether Max Stirner is a psychological egoist is disputed. David Leopold, for example, argues that he is not. (For Leopold's argument, see Stirner 1995, xxiv–xxv).

ETHICAL EGOISM

While psychological egoism claims that the ultimate goal of one's action is one's own self-interest, ethical egoism claims that one *should* pursue one's own best interest. The basic idea of ethical egoism is this: promoting one's own best interest is in accord with morality. In its strongest form, ethical egoism claims that one acts morally if and only if one promotes one's own best interest. In this section, we will discuss and evaluate Adam Smith's and Ayn Rand's ethical egoistic claims. We will end up with learning the biggest problem with ethical egoism, which serves as a transition to our next topic: the social contract theory.

Adam Smith (1723-1790) famously argues for egoism as a practical ideal in economics: Each businessperson promoting their best interest would most effectively promote the common good, given that the "invisible hand" (i.e. free market) would coordinate individual economic activities. In other words, if both buyers and sellers pursue nothing but the best deal for themselves, a win-win situation will ensue. Another daily-life example of how ethical egoism brings out the socially optimal outcome is competitive sports. The fact that each team is out to win produces the optimal outcome: if the players played without keeping score, or if the weaker team reaped the same rewards, the game would be boring to watch and the players would not reach their full potential. In other words, only when every player promotes their best interest (i.e. playing to win) would the best outcome ensue (i.e. we will enjoy watching the game and the players will reach their potential).

According to Smith, the successful function of the invisible hand depends on laissez-faire capitalism. He bases his analysis of social institutions and behavior upon principles of human action, the starting point of which is a form of ethical egoism:

Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so. (Smith [1759] 1976, 82)

Although he believes that one should first pursue one's own best interest, Smith does not advocate being a selfish, cold-blooded person. Instead, he argues that mutual kindness is necessary for happiness (Smith [1759] 1976, 225). Starting from our natural drive of trying to share others' feelings as closely as possible, we adjust our feelings to the feelings of people we are concerned with and in this process we eventually develop virtues (110-133, 135-136). Of two principal virtues, justice and beneficence, the exercise of beneficence "deserves highest reward" (81). Here is a rough picture: Given our natural drives and our social condition, we are on the path of developing virtues, the most important of which is beneficence. Yet given that mutual kindness is necessary for happiness, we can say that practicing kindness is necessary for one's own best interest. In benefiting another person, one is still pursuing one's own self-interest.²

Ayn Rand (1905-1982), who also argues for ethical egoism and laissez-faire capitalism, however, argues that selfishness is a virtue. Altruism, which demands self-sacrifice, is even immoral. According to her, life is the ultimate value, and hence "no society can be of value to man's life if the price is

2. We should note that Smith is not a thoroughgoing egoist who argues that morality is founded upon self-interest. According to Smith, moral rules stipulate what is fit and proper to be done or to be avoided and these rules are not dictated by self-love (159). It is the "impartial spectator," not self-love, that shows us "the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others" (137).

the surrender of his right to his life” (Rand 1964, 32). Concerned for the survival of civilization, she condemns altruism for being responsible for destroying the civilized world. Altruism is also responsible for making totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia possible, given that altruism holds

death as its ultimate goal and standard of value—and it is logical that renunciation, resignation, self-denial, and every other form of suffering, including self-destruction, are the virtues it advocates. (Rand 1964, 34-35)

Given that humans are rational beings, and that life is the ultimate value, “rational selfishness” is what one should pursue (25-31). To act rationally is to put one’s own interest first. According to Rand, not only is promoting one’s own best interest rational, it is also morally correct.

Without the burden of proving empirically that everyone must always act out of self-interest, ethical egoism is more appealing than psychological egoism. However, the biggest challenge to ethical egoism is that it lacks authoritative regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest. Let me use an example to illustrate this point. Suppose my grandfather indicated in his will that I am his sole heir and suppose also that he is not bothered by any severe sickness. Suppose my cousin has been working her way to replace me as the sole heir and suppose that I am in a bad situation which requires a lot of money that I don’t have. Can it be morally wrong for me to kill my grandfather to ensure that I get the money now? Ethical egoism cannot answer this question, because from my perspective it would not be morally wrong but from my grandfather’s perspective it would be, and there’s no way to adjudicate between these perspectives.

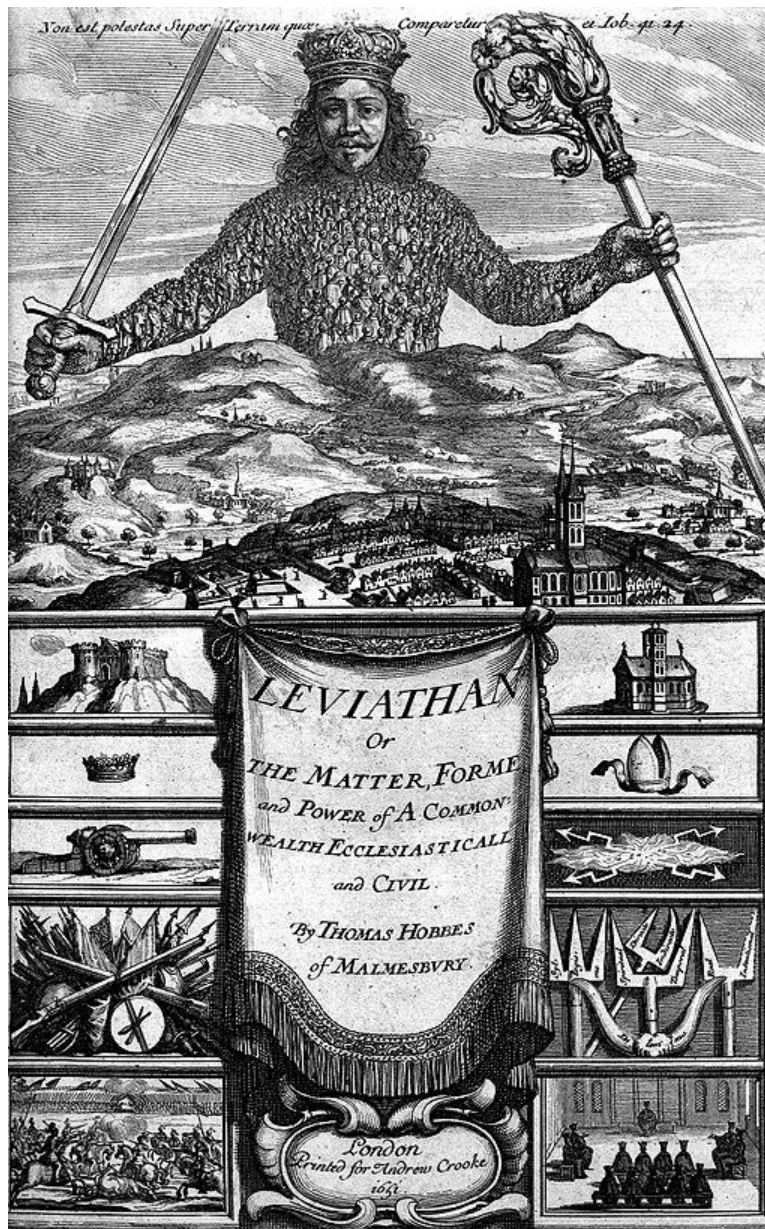
Someone might also argue that ethical egoism borders on being incoherent. If what ethical egoism advocates is that everyone should do what is in their best interest, it seems confusing, if not outright inconsistent, that ethical egoism argues that doing so is how we promote the social good (i.e., the good that goes beyond the scope of self-interest). It seems self-contradictory to care about promoting social good while caring only about promoting one’s own best interest. Whether this objection is damaging to ethical egoism depends on whether promoting social good is fundamentally incompatible with promoting one’s own best interest. Smith apparently thinks that they are not fundamentally incompatible because he finds a way to incorporate the virtue of benevolence into his ethical egoism. Whether he is successful in doing that (i.e. whether his assumption that we have a natural tendency to care about others’ welfare fits well with ethical egoism) is another question. But the challenge seems to apply to Rand. If, as Rand argues, one should promote one’s own good and altruism is immoral, then it is confusing as to why she concerns herself with the issue of the survival of civilization (which presumably promotes the common good).

The biggest problem for ethical egoism is that it fails to be a moral theory because it cannot deal with interpersonal conflicts of interest. Only asking people to pursue their individual interests is not enough. As countless examples show, we can all benefit much more from cooperation. The issue of coordination is crucial given interpersonal conflicts of interest. Concern for coordination leads us to the last topic of this chapter: social contract theory.

SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

The basic idea of social contract theory in ethics is that ethical rules are sets of conventionally

established limits we impose on ourselves in keeping with our own longer-term interests. This answers two fundamental questions about morality, namely, what is required and why we should obey. What is morally required is what we, as rational and self-interested agents, do or would agree upon. The reason why we should obey is because we have agreed, or would do so if we were being fully rational. Social contract theory shares the core assumption of egoism that we are self-interested and rational agents. However, realizing that living together in a society requires a set of rules for social cooperation, social contract theory provides a justification for why we should coordinate with others. Unlike egoism which cannot provide an impartial regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest, social contract theory not only provides a way to handle conflicts of interest but also provides a justification for it. Given extra assumptions about human nature, we might end up following Thomas Hobbes or John Rawls. But both agree that moral rules are essentially conventional and binding only to the degree that we see them as serving our own interests.



[Frontispiece](#) to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* by Abraham Bosse. via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

If moral and social rules are conventional, what would life be like without such rules, and how would this establish a motivation for defining and then following such rules? In particular, given that we are self-interested, why would we agree to obey a set of rules that sometimes limit our own self-interest? According to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the pre-political natural state of humanity, which he imagines as “the state of nature,” is a war of all against all in which people’s lives are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes [1651] 1996, 89). This miserable picture is derived from the following empirical and normative assumptions: his empirical assumptions are that people are sufficiently similar in their physical and mental faculties that no one is invulnerable and we all fear death (86-87, 90). His normative assumptions are that each person in the state of nature has the liberty to preserve their own lives and a right to do whatever in one’s opinion is necessary for survival; he calls it “the right of nature.” There is no constraint on the right of nature; “every man has a

right to everything, even to one another's body" (91). Given that resources are limited and we are all vulnerable in the process of exerting our rights of nature, Hobbes paints the state of nature as hell. Hobbes then envisions that we start to form social conventions based on mutual advantage. For example, although in the state of nature there is nothing inherently wrong in harming you, I would be better off by refraining to do so if everyone else does the same. A social convention against injury is thus formed. Hobbes calls such a convention "a law of nature." The fundamental law of nature is "to seek peace, and follow it," whereas the upshot of the entire set of laws of nature is "that law of the Gospel: 'whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them'" (92). In short, Hobbes's social contract theory claims that moral requirements are nothing but social convention that we as rational and self-interested agents agree upon for the sake of survival. Given that everyone's life is vulnerable in the state of nature, it is mutually advantageous to obey the social convention.

As a reader, you might wonder whether Hobbes's story of the state of nature ever happened. But how damaging is it to his moral theory if it turns out that in history people were never in the state of nature? Some people adopt a hypothetical strategy, arguing that people would have agreed upon the laws of nature were they in the state of nature. But a hypothetical agreement lacks the strength of a real agreement. I cannot demand you to fulfill a hypothetical agreement that you financially support me for the rest of my life, even if doing so would be in your best interest, because we did not *actually* agree to this at a prior time. As far as I can see, the real problem is whether understanding moral requirements as social conventions, the obeying of which is of mutual advantage, has enough force to ensure that everyone does obey.

David Gauthier, a contemporary Hobbesian, argues that social conventions agreed upon as moral requirements are derived from a bargaining process over mutually advantageous conventions. Given that social conventions are derived from bargaining, people with the upper hand have little incentive to produce a fair convention for the weak. After all, there is little to gain from cooperating with the weak and little to fear of their retaliation. Even if a fair convention that takes care of the interests of the weak is agreed upon, it does not guarantee that the strong will obey. After all, whether it is advantageous to follow a particular convention also depends on one's bargaining power. In Gauthier's theory, defenseless or people with disabilities "fall beyond the pale" of morality (Gauthier 1986, 268). That is to say, moral constraints will only arise if people are roughly equal in power. Were I a person with disabilities, I would be left out of moral consideration. This seems to push us back to a situation close to Hobbes's state of nature, a situation where the strong exploits the weak. If moral requirements are all about the strong exploiting the weak, we don't even need to call them "requirements" because humans easily, if not naturally, act that way.

Another contemporary social contract theory—Kantian contractarianism—has an entirely different outlook even though it shares the same assumption that we are rational and self-interested agents. Kantian contractarianism bases the social contract on a natural equality of moral status which makes each person's interests a matter of impartial concern. It has roots in Immanuel Kant's (1724-1807) moral theory (see [Chapter 6](#)) which takes each person as "an end in itself," an intrinsically valuable moral status, and demands each person act in accord with universalizable personal policies (which Kant calls "maxims") as a member of the community (Kant [1785] 2002). Following Kant's idea that our equal status (as an end in itself) demands us to act in an impartial way in a community, John Rawls

(1921-2002) develops a social contract theory that answers the question “What terms of cooperation would free and equal citizens agree to under fair conditions?” Whereas Hobbes’s social contract is based on the state of nature, Rawls’s is based on “the original position of equality” where people, as free and equal beings, collectively figure out the social contract that they agree upon. To avoid the strong having dominant bargaining power over the weak in the process as Gauthier paints it, Rawls stipulates that people in the original position make the bargain under a “veil of ignorance,” that is, people have no idea of their natural talents and their social position. Because people are not aware of any natural or social differences between them, they are equal and more likely to act toward each other in a non-biased, impartial way. Notice that Rawls’s idea of the “original position” does not refer to any actual historical event. Rather, it is a device that helps us vividly imagine a fair and impartial point of view, when we reason about fundamental principles of justice. To maximize one’s own best interest in this condition, Rawls believes, people will come up with and endorse a fair contract in an impartial way. If inequality is unavoidable, it must be justified to those made worse off, and perhaps even subject to their veto. Hence, vulnerable people won’t be excluded from the domain of morality as they will be in Gauthier’s picture. Rawls assumes that people will act benevolently if they are rational, self-interested, and behind the veil of ignorance. Thus, the original position “represents equality between human beings as moral persons” (Rawls 1971, 190).

CONCLUSION

Although it is hard to prove that everyone must always act out of self-interest, it is probably true that we have *the tendency* to act for the sake of promoting our own best interest. The starting point of both egoism and social contract theory is that we are self-interested and rational beings. However, basing morality on self-interest alone does not get us far and even defeats the idea of morality. Why should we continue to follow moral rules in cases where following them would not in fact be in our personal best interest? A social contract theory, be it Hobbes’s, Gauthier’s, or Rawls’s, can still suffer from the prisoner’s dilemma where everyone rationally acts in a self-interested way even when doing so is detrimental for the good of all involved.³ For example, my roommate and I agree that it is best if everyone helps keep the place clean. Out of self-interest, it is rational for each of us to find some excuse not to clean up. As a result, no one *actually* keeps the agreement and our place probably is a mess. Moral requirements based on agreement thus still lack sufficient force to ensure that everyone in fact does comply. Why *should* we follow norms that restrict our choices in certain cases? In the previous chapters, we have seen that the authority of cultural norms, religious rules, and appeals to nature do not conclusively show why it is that we should follow the rules. In this chapter, we have seen that appealing to self-interest is also not sufficient to account for such rules. Instead, we need to derive more objective ethical principles from reason. Rawls’s Kantian idea is a move toward objective

3. How Jean Hampton criticized Hobbes can also apply to contemporary contractarianism. She doubts whether having a social contract can indeed function as well as intended. Suppose the war of all against all is triggered by greed or fear; there is no guarantee that a person who was greedy before the contract is drawn up will stop being greedy after the contract is drawn up. Moreover, having a social contract seems to not guarantee that we can be entirely free of the prisoner’s dilemma. That is, given that there is no guarantee that another person will keep their end of the bargain, it’s better for me not to keep my end of the bargain. No matter how harsh a punishment we set up for a contract violator, there is always someone who is willing to take the risk. In short, Hampton’s point is that whatever makes a person unable to cooperate before a contract is drawn up might not go away after a contract is drawn up. A contractarian cannot guarantee that (Hampton, 1986). Gauthier’s response is that a contract can avoid the problem if the contractors realize that they are in an environment of like-minded individuals (Gauthier 1986, 160-166). Whether Gauthier’s response really solves the problem, however, is disputed (see Vallentyne 1991).

and impartial ethical principles. The following chapters explore other philosophers who base such principles upon reason.

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CHAPTER 5.

UTILITARIANISM

FRANK ARAGBONFOH ABUMERE

INTRODUCTION

Let us start our introduction to utilitarianism with an example that shows how utilitarians answer the following question, “Can the ends justify the means?” Imagine that Peter is an unemployed poor man in New York. Although he has no money, his family still depends on him; his unemployed wife (Sandra) is sick and needs \$500 for treatment, and their little children (Ann and Sam) have been thrown out of school because they could not pay tuition fees (\$500 for both of them). Peter has no source of income and he cannot get a loan; even John (his friend and a millionaire) has refused to help him. From his perspective, there are only two alternatives: either he pays by stealing or he does not. So, he steals \$1000 from John in order to pay for Sandra’s treatment and to pay the tuition fees of Ann and Sam. One could say that stealing is morally wrong. Therefore, we will say that what Peter has done— stealing from John—is morally wrong.

Utilitarianism, however, will say what Peter has done is morally right. For utilitarians, stealing in itself is neither bad nor good; what makes it bad or good is the consequences it produces. In our example, Peter stole from one person who has less need for the money, and spent the money on three people who have more need for the money. Therefore, for utilitarians, Peter’s stealing from John (the “means”) can be justified by the fact that the money was used for the treatment of Sandra and the tuition fees of Ann and Sam (the “end”). This justification is based on the calculation that the benefits of the theft outweigh the losses caused by the theft. Peter’s act of stealing is morally right because it produced more good than bad. In other words, the action produced more pleasure or happiness than pain or unhappiness, that is, it increased net utility.

The aim of this chapter is to explain why utilitarianism reaches such a conclusion as described above, and then examine the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism. The discussion is divided into three parts: the first part explains what utilitarianism is, the second discusses some varieties (or types) of utilitarianism, and the third explores whether utilitarianism is persuasive and reasonable.

WHAT IS UTILITARIANISM?

Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism. For consequentialism, the moral rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the consequences it produces. On consequentialist grounds, actions and inactions whose negative consequences outweigh the positive consequences will be deemed morally wrong while actions and inactions whose positive consequences outweigh the negative consequences will be deemed morally right. On utilitarian grounds, actions and inactions which benefit few people and harm more people will be deemed morally wrong while actions and inactions which harm fewer people and benefit more people will be deemed morally right.



[John Stuart Mill](#). In *Popular Science Monthly Volume III* via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

Benefit and harm can be characterized in more than one way; for classical utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), they are defined in terms of happiness/unhappiness and pleasure/pain. On this view, actions and inactions that cause less pain or unhappiness and more pleasure or happiness than available alternative actions and inactions will be deemed morally right, while actions and inactions that cause more pain or unhappiness and less pleasure or happiness than available alternative actions and inactions will be deemed morally wrong. Although pleasure and happiness can have different meanings, in the context of this chapter they will be treated as synonymous.

Utilitarians' concern is how to increase net utility. Their moral theory is based on the principle of utility which states that "the morally right action is the action that produces the most good" (Driver 2014). The morally wrong action is the one that leads to the reduction of the maximum good. For instance, a utilitarian may argue that although some armed robbers robbed a bank in a heist, as

long as there are more people who benefit from the robbery (say, in a Robin Hood-like manner the robbers generously shared the money with many people) than there are people who suffer from the robbery (say, only the billionaire who owns the bank will bear the cost of the loss), the heist will be morally right rather than morally wrong. And on this utilitarian premise, if more people suffer from the heist while fewer people benefit from it, the heist will be morally wrong.

From the above description of utilitarianism, it is noticeable that utilitarianism is opposed to deontology, which is a moral theory that says that as moral agents we have certain duties or obligations, and these duties or obligations are formalized in terms of rules (see Chapter 6). There is a variant of utilitarianism, namely rule utilitarianism, that provides rules for evaluating the utility of actions and inactions (see the next part of the chapter for a detailed explanation). The difference between a utilitarian rule and a deontological rule is that according to rule utilitarians, acting according to the rule is correct because the rule is one that, if widely accepted and followed, will produce the most good. According to deontologists, whether the consequences of our actions are

positive or negative does not determine their moral rightness or moral wrongness. What determines their moral rightness or moral wrongness is whether we act or fail to act in accordance with our duty or duties (where our duty is based on rules that are not themselves justified by the consequences of their being widely accepted and followed).

SOME VARIETIES (OR TYPES) OF UTILITARIANISM

The above description of utilitarianism is general. We can, however, distinguish between different types of utilitarianism. First, we can distinguish between “actual consequence utilitarians” and “foreseeable consequence utilitarians.” The former base the evaluation of the moral rightness and moral wrongness of actions on the actual consequences of actions; while the latter base the evaluation of the moral rightness and moral wrongness of actions on the foreseeable consequences of actions. J. J. C. Smart (1920-2012) explains the rationale for this distinction with reference to the following example: imagine that you rescued someone from drowning. You were acting in good faith to save a drowning person, but it just so happens that the person later became a mass murderer. Since the person became a mass murderer, actual consequence utilitarians would argue that in hindsight the act of rescuing the person was morally wrong. However, foreseeable consequence utilitarians would argue that—looking forward (i.e., in foresight)—it could not be foreseen that the person was going to be a mass murderer, hence the act of rescuing them was morally right (Smart 1973, 49). Moreover, they could have turned out to be a “saint” or Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King Jr., in which case the action would be considered to be morally right by actual consequence utilitarians.

A second distinction we can make is that between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism focuses on individual actions and says that we should apply the principle of utility in order to evaluate them. Therefore, act utilitarians argue that among possible actions, the action that produces the most utility would be the morally right action. But this may seem impossible to do in practice since, for every thing that we might do that has a potential effect on other people, we would thus be morally required to examine its consequences and pick the one with the best outcome. Rule utilitarianism responds to this problem by focusing on general types of actions and determining whether they typically lead to good or bad results. This, for them is the meaning of commonly held moral rules: they are generalizations of the typical consequences of our actions. For example, if stealing typically leads to bad consequences, stealing in general would be considered by a rule utilitarian to be wrong.¹

Hence rule utilitarians claim to be able to reinterpret talk of rights, justice, and fair treatment in terms of the principle of utility by claiming that the rationale behind any such rules is really that these rules generally lead to greater welfare for all concerned. We may wonder whether utilitarianism in general is capable of even addressing the notion that people have rights and deserve to be treated justly and fairly, because in critical situations the rights and wellbeing of persons can be sacrificed as long as this seems to lead to an increase overall utility.

1. Of course, there may be exceptions to such a rule in particular, atypical cases if stealing might lead to better consequences. This raises a complication for rule utilitarians: if they were to argue that we should follow rules such as “do not steal” except in those cases where stealing would lead to better consequences, then this could mean rule utilitarianism wouldn’t be very different from act utilitarianism. One would still have to evaluate the consequences of each particular act to see if one should follow the rule or not. Hooker (2016) argues that rule utilitarianism need not collapse into act utilitarianism in this way, because it would be better to have a set of rules that are more clear and easily understood and followed than ones that require us to evaluate many possible exceptions.

For example, in a version of the famous “trolley problem,” imagine that you and an overweight stranger are standing next to each other on a footbridge above a rail track. You discover that there is a runaway trolley rolling down the track and the trolley is about to kill five people who cannot get off of the track quickly enough to avoid the accident. Being willing to sacrifice yourself to save the five persons, you consider



Trams in Christchurch by [Bernard Spragg](#) via Flickr. This work is in the public domain (CC0).

jumping off the bridge, in front of the trolley...but you realize that you are far too light to stop the trolley....The only way you can stop the trolley killing five people is by pushing this large stranger off the footbridge, in front of the trolley. If you push the stranger off, he will be killed, but you will save the other five. (Singer 2005, 340)

Utilitarianism, especially act utilitarianism, seems to suggest that the life of the overweight stranger should be sacrificed regardless of any purported right to life he may have. A rule utilitarian, however, may respond that since in general killing innocent people to save others is not what typically leads to the best outcomes, we should be very wary of making a decision to do so in this case. This is especially true in this scenario since everything rests on our calculation of what might possibly stop the trolley, while in fact there is really far too much uncertainty in the outcome to warrant such a serious decision. If nothing else, the emphasis placed on general principles by rule utilitarians can serve as a warning not to take too lightly the notion that the ends might justify the means.

Whether or not this response is adequate is something that has been extensively debated with reference to this famous example as well as countless variations. This brings us to our final question here about utilitarianism—whether it is ultimately a persuasive and reasonable approach to morality.

IS UTILITARIANISM PERSUASIVE AND REASONABLE?

First of all, let us start by asking about the principle of utility as the foundational principle of morality, that is, about the claim that what is morally right is just what leads to the better outcome. John Stuart Mill’s argument that it is based on his claim that “each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness” (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 4). Mill derives the principle of utility from this claim based on three considerations, namely desirability, exhaustiveness, and impartiality. That is, happiness is desirable as an end in itself; it is the only thing that is so desirable (exhaustiveness); and no one person’s happiness is really any more desirable or less desirable than that of any other person (impartiality) (see Macleod 2017).

In defending desirability, Mill argues,

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner...the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 4)

In defending exhaustiveness, Mill does not argue that other things, apart from happiness, are not desired as such; but while other things *appear* to be desired, happiness is the only thing that is *really* desired since whatever else we may desire, we do so because attaining that thing would make us happy. Finally, in defending impartiality, Mill argues that equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether the happiness is felt by the same person or by different persons. In Mill's words, "each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons" (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 4). We may wonder, however, whether this last argument is truly adequate. Does Mill really show here that we should treat everyone's happiness as equally worthy of pursuit, or does he simply assert this?

Let us grant that Mill's argument here is successful and the principle of utility is the basis of morality. Utilitarianism claims that we should thus calculate, to the best of our ability, the expected utility that will result from our actions and how it will affect us and others, and use that as the basis for the moral evaluation of our decisions. But then we may ask, how exactly do we quantify utility? Here there are two different but related problems: how can I come up with a way of comparing different types of pleasure and pain, benefit or harm that I myself might experience, and how can I compare my benefit and yours on some neutral scale of comparison? Bentham famously claimed that there was a single universal scale that could enable us to objectively compare all benefits and harms based on the following factors: intensity, duration, certainty/uncertainty, proximity, fecundity, purity, and extent. And he offered on this basis what he called a "felicific calculus" as a way of objectively comparing any two pleasures we might encounter (Bentham [1789] 1907).

For example, let us compare the pleasure of drinking a pint of beer to that of reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Suppose the following are the case:

- The pleasure derived from drinking a pint of beer is more intense than the pleasure derived from reading *Hamlet* (intensity).
- The pleasure of drinking the beer lasts longer than that of reading *Hamlet* (duration).
- We are confident that drinking the beer is more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet* (certainty/uncertainty).
- The beer is closer to us than the play, and therefore it is easier for us to access the former than the latter (proximity).
- Drinking the beer is more likely to promote more pleasure in the future while reading *Hamlet* is less likely to promote more pleasure in the future (fecundity).
- Drinking the beer is pure pleasure while reading *Hamlet* is mixed with something else (purity).
- Finally, drinking the beer affects both myself and my friends in the bar and so has a greater extent than my solitary reading of *Hamlet* (extent).

Since, on all of these measures, drinking a pint of beer is more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet*, it follows according to Bentham that it is objectively better for you to drink the pint of beer and forget about reading *Hamlet*, and so you should. Of course, it is up to each individual to make such a calculation based on the intensity, duration, certainty, etc. of the pleasure resulting from each possible choice they may make in their eyes, but Bentham at least claims that such a comparison is possible.

This brings us back to the problem we mentioned before that, realistically, we cannot be expected to always engage in very difficult calculations every single time we want to make a decision. In an attempt to resolve this problem, utilitarians might claim that in the evaluation of the moral rightness and moral wrongness of actions, the application of the principle of utility can be backward-looking (based on hindsight) or forward-looking (based on foresight). That is, we can use past experience of the results of our actions as a guide to estimating what the probable outcomes of our actions might be and save ourselves from the burden of having to make new estimates for each and every choice we may face.

In addition, we may wonder whether Bentham's approach misses something important about the different kinds of pleasurable outcomes we may pursue. Mill, for example, would respond to our claim that drinking beer is objectively more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet* by saying that it overlooks an important distinction between qualitatively different kinds of pleasure. In Mill's view Bentham's calculus misses the fact that not all pleasures are equal—there are “higher” and “lower” pleasures that make it “better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (Mill [1861] 1879, Ch. 2). Mill justifies this claim by saying that between two pleasures, although one pleasure requires a greater amount of difficulty to attain than the other pleasure, if those who are competently acquainted with both pleasures prefer (or value) one over the other, then the one is a higher pleasure while the other is a lower pleasure. For Mill, although drinking a pint of beer may seem to be more pleasurable than reading *Hamlet*, if you are presented with these two options and you are to make a choice—each and every time or as a rule—you should still choose to read *Hamlet* and forego drinking the pint of beer. Reading *Hamlet* generates a higher quality (although perhaps a lower quantity) of pleasure, while drinking a pint of beer generates lower quality (although higher quantity) of pleasure.

In the end, these issues may be merely technical problems faced by utilitarianism—is there some neutral scale of comparison between pleasures? If there is, is it based on Bentham's scale which makes no distinctions between higher and lower pleasures, or Mill's which does? The more serious problem, however, remains, which is that utilitarianism seems willing in principle to sacrifice the interests and even perhaps lives of individuals for the sake of the benefit of a larger group. And this seems to conflict with our basic moral intuition that people have a *right* not to be used in this way. While Mill argued that the notion of rights could be accounted for on purely utilitarian terms, Bentham simply dismissed it. For him such “natural rights” are “simple nonsense, natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense—nonsense upon stilts” (Bentham [1796] 1843, 501).

CONCLUSION

Let us conclude by revisiting the question we started with: can the ends justify the means? I stated that as far as utilitarianism is concerned the answer to this question is in the affirmative. While the answer is plausible and right for utilitarians, it is implausible for many others, and notably wrong for deontologists. As we have seen in this chapter, on a close examination utilitarianism is less persuasive and less reasonable than it appears to be when it is far away.

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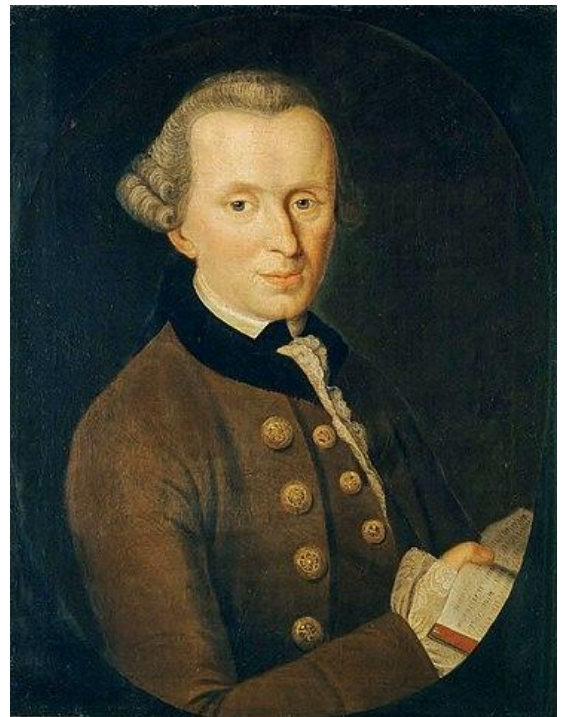
CHAPTER 6.

KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY

JOSEPH KRANAK

Relative to most other philosophers, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a late bloomer, publishing his first significant work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, in 1781 at age 57. But this didn't slow him down, as through his 50s, 60s, and 70s, he published numerous large and influential works in many areas of philosophy, including ethics. He published two large works on ethics, *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, but it's his first short work of ethics, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that is his most important because it provides a succinct and relatively readable account of his ethics.

Some of the main questions that Kant's ethics focuses on are questions of right and wrong: What makes an action right or wrong? Which actions are we required by morality to perform? Do consequences matter? Is it ever permissible to do something morally wrong in order to achieve good consequences? Is it important to do actions with good intentions? And what are good intentions? Some of Kant's answers to some of these questions are complex, but as we will see, he doesn't think that consequences matter and thus good consequences cannot justify wrong actions. He also thinks that intentions are important to the ethical evaluation of actions.



[Immanuel Kant \(1724-1804\)](#) by Johann Gottlieb Becker via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

DEONTOLOGY

One of the distinctive features of Kant's ethics is that it focuses on duties, defined by right and wrong. Right and wrong (which are the primary deontic categories, along with obligatory, optional, supererogatory, and others) are distinct from good and bad (which are value categories) in that

they directly prescribe actions: right actions are ones we ought to do (are morally required to do) and wrong actions we ought not to do (are morally forbidden from doing). This style of ethics is referred to as deontology. The name comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty or obligation. In deontology, the deontic categories are primary, while value determinations are derived from them. As we'll see, Kant believes all our duties can be derived from the categorical imperative. We'll first need to explain what Kant means by the phrase "categorical imperative" and then we'll look at the content of this rule.

First, Kant believes that morality must be rational. He models his morality on science, which seeks to discover universal laws that govern the natural world. Similarly, morality will be a system of universal rules that govern action. In Kant's view, as we will see, right action is ultimately a rational action. As an ethics of duty, Kant believes that ethics consists of commands about what we ought to do. The word "imperative" in his categorical imperative means a command or order. However, unlike most other commands, which usually come from some authority, these commands come from within, from our own reason. Still, they function the same way: they are commands to do certain actions.

Kant distinguishes two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative is a contingent command. It's conditional on a person's wants, needs, or desires and normally comes in the following form: "If you want/need A, then you ought to do B." For example, the advice, "If you want to do well on a test, then you should study a lot" would be a hypothetical imperative. The command that you study is contingent on your desire to do well on the test. Other examples are, "If you are thirsty, drink water," or "If you want to be in better shape, you should exercise." Such commands are more like advice on how to accomplish our goals than moral rules. If you don't have a particular want, desire, or goal, then a hypothetical imperative doesn't apply. For example, if you don't want to be in better shape, then the hypothetical imperative that you should exercise, doesn't apply to you.

A genuinely moral imperative would not be contingent on wants, desires, or needs, and this is what is meant by a categorical imperative. A categorical imperative, instead of taking an if-then form, is an absolute command, such as, "Do A," or "You ought to do A." Examples of categorical imperatives would be "You shouldn't kill," "You ought to help those in need," or "Don't steal." It doesn't matter what your wants or goals are; you should follow a categorical imperative no matter what.

But these aren't *the* categorical imperative. Kant believes that there is one categorical imperative that is the most important and that should guide all of our actions. This is the ultimate categorical imperative from which all other moral rules are derived. This categorical imperative can be expressed in several different ways, and Kant presents three formulations of it in *The Groundwork*.

THE FIRST FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The underlying idea behind the first formulation of the categorical imperative is that moral rules are supposed to be universal laws. If we think of comparable laws, such as scientific laws like the law of gravitational attraction or Newton's three laws of motion, they are universal and apply to all people equally, no matter who they are or what their needs are. If our moral rules are to be rational, then they should have the same form.

From this idea, Kant derives his first formulation of the categorical imperative, “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (*Groundwork* 4:421).¹

First, we must explain this word “maxim.” What Kant means by a maxim is a personal rule or a general principle that underlies a particular action. As rational beings, we don’t just act randomly; we devise certain rules that tell us what to do in different circumstances. A complete maxim will include three pieces: the action, the circumstances under which we do that action, and the purpose behind that action. For example, the maxim explaining why you’re reading this book, if it’s an assigned text, might be, “I will read all books assigned for class because I want to succeed in class.” Different principles could underlie the same action. For example, you might be reading this book simply to help you understand the topic, in which case your principle might be, “When I am confused about a topic, I will read an accessible text to improve my understanding.” The important point is that we are guided by general principles that we give to ourselves, that tell us what we’ll do in certain circumstances.

The first formulation, thus, is a test of whether any particular maxim should be followed or not. We test a maxim by universalizing it, that is, by asking if it would be possible for everyone to live by this maxim. If the maxim can be universalized, meaning that it’s possible that everyone could live by it, then it’s permissible to follow it. If it can’t be universalized, then it is impermissible to follow it. The logic of the universalization test is that any rule you follow should apply to everyone—there’s nothing special about you that allows you to be an exception.

To look at some examples, imagine you need money to pay off some debts. You go to a friend to borrow the money and tell this friend that you will pay him back. You know you won’t be able to pay your friend back, but you promise him nonetheless. You are making a false promise. Is this permissible? To test, we first look at the maxim underlying the action, something like, “If I need something, I’ll make a false promise in order to get what I need.” What would happen if everyone were to make false promises every time they needed something? False promises would be rampant, so rampant that promises would become meaningless; they would just be empty words. For this reason, the maxim can’t be universalized. The maxim included the idea of making a promise, but if, when universalized, promises cease to have any meaning, then we couldn’t really make a promise. Since the maxim can’t be universalized, we shouldn’t follow it, and thus we derive the duty to not make false promises.

We should note that Kant’s universalization test is not asking whether universalizing a maxim would lead to undesirable consequences. Kant is not claiming that making a false promise is wrong because we wouldn’t want to live in a world where no one kept their promises. It’s wrong because it’s not possible to universalize the maxim. It’s not possible because it leads to a contradiction. In this case, the contradiction is in the concept of a promise: that it becomes meaningless when universalized. We can see this with other maxims. If you’re thinking of stealing something, the maxim underlying this

1. There are many different editions and translations of Kant’s works, and it is common practice in the philosophical community to use a standard referencing system that is the same across all of these rather than using page numbers (which differ across the various editions). The standard system, used in this chapter as well, refers to the German Royal Academy of Sciences edition of Kant’s works, Kant’s *Gesammelte Schriften*. Most editions of Kant’s texts will have the Academy reference numbers in them to make it easy to find quotes and arguments across editions.

action might be something like, “I’ll steal the things I want so I can have what I want.” If everyone were to follow this maxim, then the concept of ownership would cease to have any meaning, and if nothing were owned, then how would it be possible to steal? To steal means to take someone else’s property without permission, and this is where the contradiction comes in. It’s not possible to steal if nothing belongs to anyone. Thus, it’s not possible to universalize this maxim, and we thereby get the duty that we shouldn’t steal. Both of these contradictions are what Kant calls “contradictions in conception.”

Another example Kant gives is of our obligation to help out others. Suppose you could help people but didn’t want to. Your maxim might be, “I will never help out anyone else since everyone should be independent.” If this were universalized, then everyone would be completely independent, with no one asking for, nor offering help. However, we wouldn’t be able to live in a world where no one helps anyone because we’ll inevitably sometimes need others’ help. The contradiction in this case is a practical contradiction, “a contradiction in will,” as Kant calls it. In this case, we would eventually have to break the maxim due to our need for help. Thus, from this, we get the duty that we should sometimes help out others in need.

PROBLEMS WITH THE FIRST FORMULATION

One criticism that Kant faced among his contemporaries was for his stance on lying, since he said that we always have a duty to be truthful to others (*Metaphysics of Morals* 8:426). His reasoning seems to be that if we were to try to universalize a maxim that permits lying, such as “I will lie whenever it’s convenient to get what I want,” then people would be lying constantly, and it would lead to the concepts of “lie” and “truth” becoming meaningless. Thus, since “lie” would no longer mean anything, it’s impossible to universalize this maxim, and thus we should never lie. His contemporaries thought there must be cases where lying is permissible, and Kant responded in “On a Supposed Right to Lie From Philanthropy.” In this essay, Kant imagined a situation that would seem to permit lying. Suppose that your friend is being pursued by someone who intends to kill him. Your friend comes to your house and asks to hide. You let him do so, and soon after, the killer is knocking at your door asking, “Is your friend inside?” Should you lie or not?

Kant asserts that you shouldn’t lie, even in these circumstances. Suppose your friend hears the killer knocking at the door and decides to flee out the back without your knowing. You lie and tell the killer that your friend is not here, and the killer leaves. Because of this, your friend and the killer bump into each other, and your friend is killed. Since your lie led to them to bump into each other, you bear some responsibility for the friend’s death. His general point is that consequences are uncertain. Importantly, Kant believes that consequences don’t affect whether an action is right or wrong, and this example highlights why: because consequences are unpredictable. The type of rational approach to ethics that Kant prefers will downplay the importance of consequences due to this unpredictability.

Another problem for the first formulation is that it’s possible to imagine maxims that can’t be universalized but that don’t seem to be immoral. For example, a stamp collector might live by the maxim, “I will buy but not sell stamps in order to expand my collection.” If everyone were to follow this, then the collector wouldn’t be able to buy because no one would be selling. This seems to lead to the implausible conclusion that collecting stamps (or collecting anything) is immoral. Since Kant says

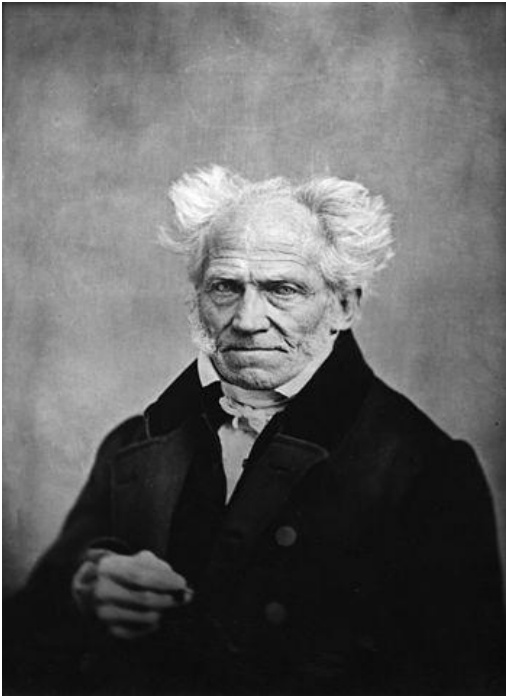
that we are to “act only in accordance” with maxims that can be universalized, then any maxim that can’t be universalized is impermissible.

Some who want to defend Kant think that the problem is with how this maxim is phrased. The maxim specifies two actions: buying and not selling. If we split it into two maxims—“I will buy stamps to expand my collection” and “I will not sell stamps to expand my collection”—the problem can be avoided. This does point to a general difficulty with the first formulation, generally referred to as the “problem of relevant descriptions,” which is that there is often more than one way to describe the maxim underlying an action. And when we formulate it some ways (like in this case with the stamp collecting) it leads to a contradiction, whereas formulating it other ways does not.

GOOD WILL

For Kant, just doing the right thing is not sufficient for making an action have full moral worth. It’s also necessary to act with good will, by which Kant means something like the inclination to do good or what is also known as a good character. He believes that a good will is essential for morality. This is intuitively plausible because it seems that if an otherwise good action is done with bad or selfish intentions, that can rob the action of its moral goodness. If we imagine a man who goes to work at a soup kitchen to help out the poor, that seems like a good action. But if he’s going there just to impress someone who works there, then that’s less virtuous. And if he’s going there to embezzle money from the charity, the action would be morally wrong.

Less intuitive is that Kant thinks the only possible genuine good will is respect for the moral law. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) would later describe Kant’s position as, “a deed must be performed simply and solely out of regard for the known law and for the concept of duty.... It must not be performed from any inclination, any benevolence felt towards others, any tender-hearted sympathy, compassion, or emotion of the heart” ([1818] 1969, 526). That is, when you do something because it is the right thing to do, that alone counts as good will.



[Arthur Schopenhauer](#) by Johann Schäffer via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

Schopenhauer was a critic of Kant's philosophy, including his ethics, and he objected that Kant's view of the good will is "directly opposed to the genuine spirit of virtue; not the deed, but the willingness to do it, the love from which it results, and without which it is a dead work, this constitutes its meritorious element" ([1818] 1969, 526). Schopenhauer thought that good people are good because they want to do good actions and they feel love and compassion towards others. If we return to the example of working in the soup kitchen, if the person is showing up to the soup kitchen because he likes helping people or he feels compassion for the people he helps and wants to improve their lot, Schopenhauer would say this is a good person and thus a virtuous action.

Kant defended his position on good will by saying that an action done out of love or out of compassion is not fully autonomous. Autonomy means self-rule, and Kant saw it as a necessary condition for freedom and morality. If an action is not done autonomously, it is not really morally good or bad. Again, if our friend at the soup kitchen is working there because of some implant in his brain by which another

person is able to control his every action, then the action is neither autonomous nor morally commendable.

Concerning acting out of love and compassion, Kant believed that when people act due to their emotions, then their emotions are in control, not their rationality. To be truly autonomous, for Kant, an action must be done because of reason. An action done because of emotion is not fully free and not quite fully moral. This doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy doing good things. It just means that this shouldn't be the reason underlying the action. According to Kant's ethics, it's morally commendable for a person, acting out of good will, to decide that helping at the soup kitchen is the right thing to do, to go there, and then to thoroughly enjoy doing so and feel great compassion for the people helped. The important point is that reason you do an action should be because you have determined that it is the right thing to do.

THE SECOND FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The idea underlying the second formulation is that all humans are intrinsically valuable. As Kant writes, "What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity" (*Groundwork* 4.434). What has a price is a thing, but a person has dignity and is thus beyond price and irreplaceable. It follows that a person with dignity deserves respect and shouldn't be treated as a thing.

Kant expresses this idea in the second formulation of his categorical imperative: "So act that you use

humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (*Groundwork* 4:429).

That is, we shouldn’t treat people merely as means to ends; we should treat them as ends, including ourselves. To treat someone merely as a means is to not give the person the proper respect—to fail to treat the person with dignity, to treat the person as a thing. It makes sense to use inanimate objects as tools—you can use a hammer as a means to drive in nails without worrying about what the hammer feels about this because it’s a thing. But if you use a person in such a way, it devalues the person. Similarly, if you harm someone, take advantage of someone, or steal from someone, then you treat that person as a thing, as a means to your ends. Conversely, if you treat someone as having unlimited value, if you treat the person with dignity and respect, then you treat the person as an end.

One important thing to add is that Kant says we should never treat people “merely as a means.” The “merely” is there to acknowledge that we can treat people as means, so long as we don’t only treat them as means. It’s not unusual to have to use other people for their skills or knowledge, so it’s necessary to sometimes treat people as means. For example, imagine that your pipes need fixing, and you call a plumber. You’re using the plumber as a means because he is making your end (to fix your pipes) his end, but there is nothing wrong with this if you also treat him as an end—that is, if you are respectful and pay him appropriately. The plumber’s end is to make a living with his plumbing skills. By paying him the agreed-upon amount, you are making his end (earning a living) your end. Thus, in this situation, you both are effectively advancing each others’ ends at the same time and thus treating each other both as ends and means.

One way to think of the idea of treating someone as ends and means is that, when you treat people as ends, you make their ends your ends, and when you treat people as means, you force them to make their ends your ends. To explain, let’s look at an example from the first formulation. Since the first formulation and the second formulation of the categorical imperative are supposed to be saying the same thing, they should come to exactly the same conclusions about what’s right and wrong. Thus, since we discovered earlier that it’s wrong to make a false promise, then the second formulation should also tell us that false promises are wrong. In our example, you made the false promise because you needed to borrow money to pay off debts; thus, your end was to pay off debts, and by lying to your friend, you are forcing him to make your end (paying off debts) his end. If you told your friend that you needed money and might not be able to pay it back, your friend would be able to decide. He might decide to make your end his end (to pay off your debts for you), but by depriving him of that choice, you are treating him as an object. For similar reasons, we can also conclude that any time we deceive someone, we are treating the person as a mere means to our ends.

We can also look at the other example from the first formulation discussed above and see that it leads to the same conclusion. Kant argued that we have an obligation to sometimes help out others in need. To help people out is to make their ends our ends. For example, if you see that someone is poor and hungry, his end at that point might be to get food. If you give him food or money to buy food, you are making it your end to feed him. Since you should treat people as ends, then that means you should sometimes provide people with help.

In addition, the second formulation also includes the idea that we shouldn’t treat ourselves as mere

means to ends. In the *Groundwork*, Kant gives two examples of duties to oneself: we shouldn't commit suicide, and we should cultivate some of our useful talents. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant presents several more, including that you should not pursue greedy avarice, stupefy yourself with excessive food or drink, nor be excessively servile.

On the Morality of Suicide

The question of the morality of suicide was a heated topic of debate in the Western intellectual tradition in Kant's day. Though we nowadays tend to think of suicide as a mental health issue and thus as a medical concern, it used to be much more often considered a moral concern. Suicide was a punishable crime in England until 1961, and both attempted and successful suicide could lead to serious penalties, with similar laws in many other countries.

The immorality of suicide was espoused by several influential Christian thinkers. Augustine, in his *City of God* (Book I, ch. 20), declared that the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," included suicide. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, Q. 64, A. 5), argued that (1) since our natural inclination is to try to stay alive and extend our life as long as possible, suicide is unnatural and therefore wrong, that (2) since our community benefits from our continued existence, then suicide harms the community, and that (3) since our life is not our own, being a gift from God, then committing suicide is a crime against God. Thus, suicide harms the self, society, and God. Dante in his *Inferno* (Canto XIII), placed those who had committed suicide in the Second Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell, for those who commit violence against the self ([1320] 1995).

Such arguments were influential in Kant's day. His own arguments in the *Groundwork* are that (1) since suicide is motivated by self-interestedness (by a desire to end the sorrows a person is experiencing) and since self-interestedness normally impels us to try to improve our life, then suicide is self-contradictory and thus wrong (4:422) and that (2) by committing suicide one is treating oneself merely as a means and not as an end (4:429). Also, in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that suicide effectively harms the morality in the world by destroying one's capacity for morality within oneself (6:423).

There were other authors who disagreed. Much earlier, in *Utopia*, Thomas More argued that suicide should be permitted in cases when people suffer from unpleasant and incurable diseases ([1516] 2012). Arthur Schopenhauer took the view in *On Suicide* that suicide, though not a sensible choice in most cases, can't be considered morally wrong because your life and person are the things that most clearly belong to you ([1851] 2015). Thus, you can dispose of them how you wish. David Hume, in his essay *Of Suicide*, published posthumously, targeted Aquinas's arguments that suicide harms self, society, and God: (1) Sometimes suicide doesn't harm the self, since in some cases, continuing to live is worse than death. (2) Suicide doesn't harm society because, by depriving society of oneself, one is merely withdrawing benefit, not harming society (and if one is actually a burden on society, then one does society great benefit). And (3) one's life must be one's own, otherwise it wouldn't make sense to praise people for risking their life for others ([1777] 1998).

Such a list of duties does raise the question, though, of what it means to treat oneself as a mere means. The idea that we could treat ourselves as a mere means seems somewhat implausible, and if we look at it the way we explained it before (to treat people as a mere means is to force them to make their ends our ends), then it doesn't make sense. Our ends are our ends and can't be anything other than our ends.

Perhaps, by treating oneself as a mere means, one is not treating oneself with respect—as a person with dignity and with unlimited value. We can see how this might apply to duties like not being too servile or not being too avaricious. By being excessively servile, you are debasing yourself, making yourself into a thing to be used by someone else. And with excessive greed, you are elevating the value of money over and above your own value.

Another way to think about it is that, by treating oneself as a mere means, one is not giving proper respect to the humanity within oneself. The second formulation specifically forbids treating the humanity in ourselves and in others as a mere means. Concerning our humanity, Kant means mostly our capacity for rational human thought. So, by treating oneself as a mere means, one is not giving proper value to this rational capacity. One can see this in the case of stupefying oneself with excessive drink. Excessive drunkenness and opium use—the two examples Kant specifically mentions in the *Metaphysics of Morals*—dull one’s thinking, and Kant describes them as turning a person into an animal, though he seems to concede that some level of moderate alcohol consumption or opium use might be permissible (6:427-6:428). Similarly, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, his argument against suicide is that, “To annihilate the subject of morality in one’s own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world” (6:423). That is, by committing suicide, you destroy some of the morality in the world by destroying your capacity for morality.

Kant on Animal Rights

Kant defines what counts as a person in terms of their capacity for rationality. This means that any being not capable of rationality lacks dignity and thus we don’t have the same moral obligation to not treat them as mere means. One of the significant implications for this is how it affects our duties to nonhuman animals. Kant’s ideas would imply that we can treat such animals however we wish. In terms of animal rights, whether animals have any rights (for example the right not to be mistreated, harmed, or killed), Kant would say that since they are not rational, they have no rights.

Kant does argue that it’s wrong to treat animals cruelly. This duty is derived from a person’s duty to himself. As Kant writes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: “With regard to the animate but non-rational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being’s duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feelings of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other people” (6:443). That is, he is saying that mistreating animals will dull one’s compassion towards other living beings and thus make one a less virtuous person.

He is clear that “the human being is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain),” which indicates that killing animals for food, or even hunting them for sport, is permissible, so long as it is done humanely. However, he does partially disapprove of using animals for medical experiments: “agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could be achieved without these, are to be abhorred.” This passage was probably directed at the then-common practice of animal vivisection, but his words would suggest that animal experiments for medical purposes, in cases when the goal is to save human lives, might perhaps be permissible. Though we should emphasize that this duty to not mistreat animals is only because of the harm one might do to oneself by this cruelty to animals: “it is always only a duty of the human being to himself” (6:443).

PROBLEMS WITH THE SECOND FORMULATION

One of the main problems with the second formulation of the categorical imperative is that it's somewhat vague. There are clear-cut cases of using people as mere means, such as slaveholders exploiting their slaves, but what about something more ambiguous like an employer underpaying his employees? The employer is advancing the employees' ends by paying them, but clearly would better promote their ends if wages were raised. But what exactly counts as "underpaying" is unavoidably vague, and the categorical imperative doesn't give clear guidance.

Another problem is that it doesn't seem that morality is entirely about not treating people as mere means to ends. The categorical imperative is supposed to be the sole principle of morality. Thus, we should be able to derive *all* moral duties from it. But it seems like there are actions that are morally wrong but which don't amount to treating anyone as mere means. For example, the destruction of the natural world through carelessness or negligence seems wrong. If I accidentally start a forest fire by setting off fireworks when there is high fire risk, aren't I morally culpable? But in what way have I treated a person merely as a means? The forest is not rational and thus is not an object of direct moral consideration. Kant does write, "A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature is opposed to a human being's duty to himself" (6:443). But if it's through neglect, it doesn't appear to be treating any person merely as means. Similarly, what about our obligation to care for the dead? If my mother wanted to be given a Christian burial and instead I simply left her body out in the woods, that would seem to be quite immoral. But how would we explain that in terms of treating her as a mere means? The body is no longer a person; it lacks humanity, rationality, and thus is a thing, and it's permissible for us to treat things as means. There are perhaps ways a defender of Kant could explain why these are wrong within a Kantian framework, but it is a potential limitation of the theory.

Kant is only able to derive obligations to not mistreat physical objects and non-rational living things from obligations to oneself and other rational beings. By misusing objects and animals, we habituate ourselves to not giving others the proper respect, which thereby debases our character. But it does seem strange to say that the reason why it's wrong to damage non-human life is because it's harmful to oneself.

THE THIRD FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant gives a third formulation of the categorical imperative based on the notion of a kingdom of ends. By kingdom, Kant explains, "I understand a systematic union of various rational beings through common laws" (*Groundwork* 4:433). By a kingdom of ends we're to imagine an interconnected world of rational beings where everyone is treated as an end and treats everyone else as ends and everyone shares the same set of laws.

Kant explains the third formulation as, "act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends" (*Groundwork* 4:439).

As mentioned, Kant believes that autonomy is necessary for morality. Kant is here emphasizing that we are each the creators of our own moral rules. We are fully autonomous beings, and if our morals were imposed on us, then that would undermine our autonomy; we would no longer fully decide our actions. To maintain full autonomy, everyone must be the creator of their own moral rules.

However, if everyone is creating their own moral rules, then wouldn't people disagree on what is right and wrong? Kant doesn't believe so. He believes that the categorical imperative is the only rational moral rule, and he also believes that we can derive a complete, consistent set of moral duties from the categorical imperative. Thus, every person who is fully following their rationality will agree on what is right and wrong.

CONCLUSION

Despite many of the criticisms to which Kant's ethics has been subject, it remains one of the most influential ethical theories in contemporary Western ethics. Many thinkers agree with its emphasis on ethics being fundamentally rational and being justifiable through reason. The first and second formulations of the categorical imperative also do have great intuitive appeal. Despite the abstract way that the first formulation is expressed, its core meaning is that ethical rules should be universal and that if any rule can't be universalized, it shouldn't be followed. This appeals to our sense that all people deserve equal moral consideration and we shouldn't make special exceptions for ourselves or others. And the second formulation speaks to the idea that we are beings with intrinsic value and with dignity, and to use people as if they are objects or tools is deeply immoral. Kant has put these intuitions into a sophisticated and carefully thought out framework that remains, to this day, a very useful way of thinking about difficult moral questions.

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CHAPTER 7.

FEMINISM AND FEMINIST ETHICS

KATHRYN MACKAY

INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, early feminist writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), began to address topics related to the political, economic, and educational status of women, and “women’s morality” (Tong and Williams 2018). This was partly motivated by a growing awareness of the real inequalities between men and women, including legal and social restrictions and prohibitions. These authors argued that disparities in educational opportunities, and the restrictions across race and gender of roles and responsibilities open to women, prevented women from fully developing as people and citizens (Wollstonecraft [1792] 2004). This was First Wave feminism, and it accomplished significant progress on emancipation and enfranchisement for women and visible minorities in the West.



[Betty Friedan](#) by Fred Palumbo via The Library of Congress. This work is in the public domain.

In the twentieth century, Betty Friedan (1921-2006) would report similar phenomena among her white university-educated peers in the 1950s United States, who had returned to the home to be full-time housewives. Friedan wrote that this group of women appeared to suffer a sort of stunting, an erosion of their abilities, and a freezing of personal, intellectual, and moral development into a childlike and immature state (Friedan [1963] 1997). It should be noted, though, that this was not the experience of black women in the US, who often worked outside the home, frequently in the employ of white women, nor the experience of working-class women across races (Collins 1989). However, women found significant commonalities among themselves in the disparity of political and employment rights compared to men in their social groups (Thompson 2002). Around the same time in France, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) published her seminal work examining the situation of women in French society, describing women's second-class status as founded upon the social and political

interpretations of biological differences between male and female (de Beauvoir [1949] 2014). The work of de Beauvoir, Friedan, and many others spurred Second Wave feminism among women in Europe and North America, as they began to examine anew the cultural, political, and moral positions that women occupied. Second Wave feminists focused their efforts on such issues as reproductive rights, domestic and sexual violence, paid maternity leave, and equal pay in the workplace.

While issues surrounding women's political and moral development had long been a concern to feminists of the First and Second waves, it was around the end of the Second Wave and the beginning of the current Third Wave (roughly around the late 1980s and early 1990s), that writers began to think about the need for a specifically feminist ethics. Up to this point, moral theories (like deontology or consequentialism) had largely ignored or remained unaware of the specific perspective and experiences of women, privileging the experiences and perspectives of the "universal" or "neutral" position. Feminists, however, pointed out that this "universal" perspective was a specifically white male perspective. Alison Jaggar wrote that one problem with traditional ethics at the time was (and potentially still is) that it views as trivial the moral issues that arise in the so-called private world, the realm in which women do housework and take care of children, the ill or infirm, and the elderly. In its formulation of the "neutral" perspective, traditional ethics was charged with favoring "male" ways of moral reasoning that emphasized rules, rights, universality, and impartiality over "female" ways of moral reasoning that emphasize relationships, responsibilities, particularity, and partiality. Additionally, Jaggar points out that traditional ethics had under-rated culturally feminine traits like "interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life" (Jaggar 1992, 363-364).

Thus, an ethics that paid particular attention to these traditionally undervalued virtues, principles, values, perspectives, and ways of knowing was required to provide a full understanding of human experiences and moral life. In the Third Wave, feminists began to criticize and discuss the various

shortcomings of the Second Wave, including its marginalisation of the voices and perspectives of women of oppressed races, ethnicities, sexual identities, and socio-economic positions (Combahee River Collective 1977; Mohanty, Torres, and Russo 1991). A feminist ethic, which paid attention to these different identities and perspectives, became centrally important to taking women's lives and experiences seriously, and central to eliminating oppression of women, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups. Thus, Jaggar framed feminist ethics as the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women.

THE ETHICS OF CARE

Care ethics, as it has become known, is an early feminist ethic that arose out of reactions to popular psychoanalytical accounts of male and female development in the mid-twentieth century, and the questioning of women's roles in society. This ethic began from observational studies in psychology, and later became a positive normative account of moral behavior. The early formulations of care ethics were criticized by both feminist theorists and philosophers working in other moral traditions. The objections to these early formulations are important, and have led to useful and interesting developments. Care ethics has advanced as a normative theory, but has perhaps made its strongest contribution as a metaethic, a position from which to begin our moral reasoning, rather than as a tool to use in sorting out particular moral cases or dilemmas.

Early Formulation

In her psychological analysis of women's moral decision-making in the 1980s, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan claimed that she found a difference in the way men and women perceived moral problems. While men focused on justice and rights, women were more likely to think about relationships in making moral decisions. In examining the question of abortion, Gilligan wrote,

[W]omen's construction of the moral problem as a problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than as one of rights and rules ties the development of their moral thinking to changes in their understanding of responsibility and relationships....Thus the logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach. (Gilligan 1982, 73)

For Gilligan, this ethic of care particular to women develops in three stages. First, a woman exhibits a focus on caring for the self in order to ensure survival, which is accompanied by a transitional phase in which this mode of thinking about the self as primary is criticized as selfish. Following this critical phase, a new understanding of the connections between one's self and others leads to the development of a concept of responsibility. Gilligan wrote that this concept of responsibility is fused with a "maternal morality," which is focused on ensuring care for the dependent and unequal people in one's circle. At this stage, the Good is defined in terms of caring for others. However, Gilligan continues, too much of a focus on others in this second stage of moral development leads to an imbalance of attention, which means that a woman must reconsider the balance between self-sacrifice and the kinds of care included in conventional ideas of feminine goodness. The third phase, then, is one which balances the self with others, and focuses on relationships and a new understanding of the connections between the self and others. The central insight in this ethic of care, Gilligan writes, is that the self and others are interdependent (Gilligan 1982).

A few years after Gilligan, Nel Noddings published *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, which provided a deeper analysis into the people—the care provider and the care receiver—and the processes involved in caring. In this book, Noddings argued that morality requires a person to have two emotions. The first of these emotions is a sentiment of “natural care.” Noddings describes this care as pre-ethical; the caretaking that a mother engages in for her child, or a maternal animal for her offspring are equally examples of this natural care. As Gilligan also argued, Noddings says that concern for others, or recognition of others’ concern for us, gives rise to a conflict between responding to the needs of others and taking care of our own needs. This conflict gives rise, in turn, to the opportunity for “ethical caring,” or responding to the recognition that another has needs, and that we are in a position to meet these needs, and further acknowledging that this situation makes a moral claim on us. However, in many cases we can recognize and respond to another’s needs by way of natural care, a disposition to care for the other that arises spontaneously in us, rather than by way of ethical care, which one would only act from if natural care has failed. In this way, natural care is preferable to ethical care on Noddings’ account (Noddings 1984).

Objections

A number of objections have been raised to Gilligan’s and to Noddings’ formulations of an ethics of care within psychology, moral theory, and feminist thought. Of those raised by feminists, the most powerful objections focus on the potential for care ethics to “essentialize” the caring relationship. This objection says that care ethics may reduce the relationship of care to essential features which are then linked to “woman’s nature” in a way that calls upon and reinforces gender-based stereotypes (e.g. women are more sensitive and caring than men). These objections stress that even if women are (for social, cultural, biological, or interconnected reasons) better at providing or giving care than are men, it may still be “epistemically, ethically, and politically imprudent to associate women with the value of care” (Tong and Williams 2018). The worry is that intimately linking women with caring may “promote the view that women are in charge of caring or, worse, that because women *can* care, they *should* care no matter the cost to themselves” (Tong and Williams 2018; emphasis added).

From a Marxist-inspired feminist perspective, Sandra Lee Bartky (1935-2016) expands on this worry in her 1990 book, *Femininity and Domination*. Bartky argues that, rather than providing women with a valued and esteemed role in a man’s world, women’s activities in “building men’s egos and binding men’s wounds” ultimately disempower women (Tong and Williams 2018). She claims that the kind of affective labor (work that significantly involves one’s having or showing certain emotions) undertaken by women in providing care for a family, and in some service-oriented occupations, causes them to disconnect from their own basic emotions and feelings. In service occupations, such as being a flight attendant, Bartky says the employee must force their own feelings into the background, and be nice (for example) regardless of the behavior of the client in front of them. This kind of emotional labor risks blurring the distinction between “real” feelings of wanting to be friendly and nice and “inauthentic” feelings that are generated by the employment obligation to be friendly and nice.

In the home, something similar happens. Bartky writes that many wives and mothers say that the experience of caring for their husbands and children, even when difficult, provides their lives with fulfillment and meaning. The more they care, the more they view themselves as the glue of the family that holds everything together for everyone else (Tong and Williams 2018). But, and importantly for

Bartky, such subjective feelings of empowerment are not the same as actually having power. A lack of power in the family means that a woman is obligated to take on these caring roles and, like the flight attendant, to force her own feelings down when they do not match with the expected behavior of a good wife or mother. So, like in employment situations, the required emotional work within the family risks blurring the distinction between a woman's real feelings of care and satisfaction with feelings that are generated by her sense of obligation and of what it means to properly perform her role.

In employment and in the household, a woman's emotional exploitation is linked closely to her economic and material oppression. Marxist-inspired feminists, such as Ann Ferguson, have argued that economic disadvantage within the household is analogous to capitalist exploitation of laborers. Ferguson analyses the "sexual division of labor" within a household, in which women are responsible for producing four main categories of goods. These are children, household maintenance, care (of children and of men), and sex (Ferguson 1991). Women and girls are taught to take pride and satisfaction in the production of these goods, while men learn that these are women's work, and therefore not their responsibility. At the same time, the production of these goods is disvalued, and the desire to do this work is connected to the idea of "being a woman." Thus, the labor that goes into the production of these things goes largely unrecognized. Bartky argues that in providing this care to her husband or children, a woman is exploited in such a way that her family benefits and has their interests advanced while she suffers damage to her own interests. In a similar vein, Sheila Mullet argues that when material conditions of oppression appear within a household, real relationships of care are prevented from forming. She argues that a woman is not in a position to truly care for someone if she is economically, socially, or psychologically forced to do so (Mullet 1988). Thus, real caring cannot occur under conditions characterized by domination and subordination. Only if women are fully equal to men can women take on the emotional work of care without fearing that men will take advantage of their labor.

Responses and Developments

Care ethics has continued to advance in recent years, in part by responding to the objections of various feminist and non-feminist thinkers. Care ethics made an important and valuable contribution in identifying that people are necessarily interconnected beings. The importance of care for morality and personal development gave rise to theories incorporating relational and intersectional conceptions of various ethical values, which will be discussed below.

A number of authors, such as Virginia Held and Eva Feder Kittay, have continued to develop care ethics into both a moral theory and a kind of metaethical framework, from which ethical obligations can be derived and in which certain moral principles and values may be grounded. There are three foundational theoretical commitments in the ethics of care that have been established amongst care theorists at this point (Sander-Staudt 2017). First, persons are understood to have varying degrees of dependence and interdependence. More about this will be said in the following section, Relational Theory. This perspective in care ethics contrasts with deontological and consequentialist moral theories that often view persons as having independent interests. Second, care ethics holds that anyone who is particularly vulnerable to one's choices and their outcomes deserves extra

consideration when making decisions. Third, the contextual details of situations must be part of the decision-making process, in order to safeguard and promote the actual interests of those concerned.

Further, in keeping with some of Noddings' early views, Held and Kittay have argued that the principle of justice can be grounded in care. Held has said that while care can exist without justice, as it may do within unjust family relationships, justice cannot exist without care. In order for an inkling of justice to take shape in our minds, we must first express concern for the condition of another, and this is an expression of care. So, care is "deeply fundamental," perhaps an ethical proto-value, motivating any further moral sentiment (Held 2005, 17; Tong and Williams 2018). In criticising Rawlsian formulations of justice as fairness, Kittay has argued that relationships of dependency characterized by care are such a fundamental part of human life that any theory of justice that leaves these out cannot achieve a just or fair society. Given that each person will experience dependency upon someone who takes on the responsibility to care for them in prolonged and significant episodes throughout one's life, such relationships and the shift in power, labor, and interests that happen within them, must be attended to by any theory attempting to form a fair distribution of benefits and goods in society. An ethic of care, thus, must be central to formulations of justice (Kittay 1997).

Furthermore, Held sees care ethics as a normative moral theory, something that can provide robust tools for determining morally good outcomes in specific dilemmas or challenges. By denying the appeal to universal moral principles, by valuing emotional responses, and by looking at the specific relationships that we have with those "particular others for whom we take responsibility," Held argues that care ethics can provide answers about what we ought to do in specific scenarios (Held 2005, 10).

However, even moral theorists who do not explicitly subscribe to an ethics of care may recognize the metaethical contribution it makes to our understanding of human interaction and moral life. The first of the three theoretical commitments of care ethics, that humans are essentially social and interconnected beings with varying degrees of independence, and not the sort of entities that pop into existence entirely able to support themselves or fully develop in the absence of social relationships characterized by interdependence and care, has had significant influence on the development of relational theories of identity and agency, as we shall see below. Thus, the metaethical notions grounding care ethics have become ingrained in feminist understandings of moral psychology, personal autonomy, rights, and responsibility.

RELATIONAL THEORY

A metaethics of care provides the background for a group of ideas sometimes called "relational theory." Here, relational autonomy and relational identity will specifically be discussed. Natalie Stoljar writes that the term "relational" makes a metaphysical claim, which denies a notion of "atomistic" personhood, "emphasizing instead that agents are socially and historically embedded, not metaphysically isolated, and are, moreover, shaped by factors such as race and class" (Stoljar 2015). Thus, the insights provided by early formulations of care ethics provide a portion of the metaphysical and metaethical starting point for seeing persons as always and unavoidably interconnected. In other words, insights from care ethics provide foundational building-block concepts for an interpretation of reality, and what our moral theories should take into account. Thus, interpersonal and social-group

relations are an important feature of the world, and must accordingly form an important part of our moral theorising.

Autonomy

When referring to autonomy, Stoljar writes that the term “relational” may serve to deny that autonomy requires self-sufficiency, as it had traditionally been formulated. In most pre-feminist formulations of autonomy, especially following the development by various scholars of Immanuel Kant’s theory, a model of cool and detached reasoning, unconcerned with personal or familial commitments, became a requirement of independent decision-making. However, this way of thinking about autonomy is problematic because, under such requirements, one must either acknowledge that no person fully meets the criteria, or willfully ignore that any person’s ability to be independent is facilitated by the ongoing care provided to them by others. If we move away from this idea of what autonomy means, and acknowledge that relationships of care and interdependence are valuable and morally significant, then as Stoljar argues, any useful theory of autonomy must at least “be ‘relational’ in the sense that it must acknowledge that autonomy is compatible with the agent standing in and valuing significant family and other social relationships” (Stoljar 2015).

In response, many theorists working on questions of agency, decision theory, and ethics, among other areas, have adopted an account of autonomy that is relational (Christman 1991; Westlund 2009; Benson 1991). Relational theories of autonomy generally start with the minimal acknowledgment that we begin as non-autonomous beings, as infants, and develop into autonomous beings gradually as we learn various sets of skills and gain specific abilities central to making our own decisions, from the mundane to the momentous. Many relational theories of autonomy also take into account that our autonomy is impacted by the process of socialisation (Benson 1991; Meyers 1987), or may be suspended at various times in our lives. For example, we may become gravely ill, and become comparatively much more dependent upon others for the duration of the illness. We may also become less autonomous as we enter into the later decades of life. Autonomy, thus, may be something that is a matter of degrees or stages of life (Meyers 1987; Friedman 1997). Relational theories of autonomy can account for these facts of human existence, attending to the importance of our close relationships in facilitating decision-making and the achievement of a good and satisfying life.

Identity

Relational identity is another theoretical perspective on human development and experience that is metaethically informed by care and by recognition of intersectionality: the intersecting identities people hold. Intersectionality was conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, reflecting the reality of black women's identities as being formed within the hierarchical power structures of both gender and race (as well as class, sexual orientation, ability, and so on) (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). In political or social movements that are oriented around "single-axis" issues, e.g. exclusively race or exclusively gender, Crenshaw argued that people with more than one of these identities were further marginalized. Crenshaw's work is politically important, and important to a feminist ethic which seeks, as Jaggar said, to theorize for all oppressed people and especially women. The acceptance of intersectionality has led to a recognition that persons are complex, and may simultaneously experience realms of their identity that are privileged while other realms of their identity are oppressed. A feminist ethic must begin from the recognition of these intersecting dynamics of power within and among individual women and social groups.



[Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) by Mohamed Badarne via Flickr.
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As such, Françoise Baylis and Margaret Urban Walker have separately argued that the formation of the self and personal identity are ongoing social processes, happening with other people and the systems around us. Baylis writes that, since persons are interdependent beings, a person's identity, "including her traits, desires, beliefs, values, emotions, intentions, memories, actions, and experiences," is informed by her relationships, which have varying degrees and kinds of intimacy and interdependence (Baylis 2011, 109). A person's public and private interactions help to structure her perception of herself and define her place in the world.

For relational identity theorists, a person is importantly constituted by the relationships and interactions they have. Baylis writes that one's identity exists in the "negotiated spaces between my biology and psychology and that of others," forming a "balance between self-ascription and ascription by others" (Baylis 2011, 110). Certain parts of myself may feel like they were created by me or perhaps were "always there," in the sense that I might not be able to easily identify the source of influence that shaped them, but all parts of me are (in)formed by interactions with the social and political world. This way of conceptualizing identity pays attention to the fact that as infants we enter a world already full of meaning. The particular meanings attached to our bodies (about, for example, skin color, biological sex, or physical ability) and certain personal characteristics (such as gender expression or sexual identity) precede us in space and time. As Walker writes, women and men in situations of oppression or subordination may find themselves subject to socially normative narratives about their identities, which are coercive and disadvantaging (Walker 1997). These narratives exist in the world into which a

person is born and grows up, impacting many aspects of their identity formation and expression. The recognition that we only ever exist within such narratives and interpersonal relationships of various kinds thus forms the backdrop for relational theories of identity formation and maintenance.

CONCLUSION

The development of feminist ethics stemmed from the recognition that the experiences and perspectives of some groups in society, including people of a minority race or ethnicity, people with disability status, people from lower socio-economic levels, and women, as well as people whose identities cut across these groupings in various ways, had been ignored or devalued by mainstream or traditional ethics, and has since been attempting to remedy this in conjunction with other anti-oppression movements. In a metaethics of care, the interdependence of human beings is taken as an enabling and necessary feature of life, rather than as something to be shaken off to achieve the greatest independence of thought or feeling. By acknowledging that “independence” is only a relative state, and that we are all, to various degrees at different stages of life, dependent on others for care and survival, feminist ethicists have achieved a revision in the way that important moral concepts, such as autonomy and personal identity, are conceived. That much caring labor is yet under- or de-valued, that its performance often still falls to women within households and disproportionately to minority-group women in the workforce, and that women still face economic disadvantages as compared to men within their social and cultural groups, remains a challenge for feminist ethicists and political philosophers.

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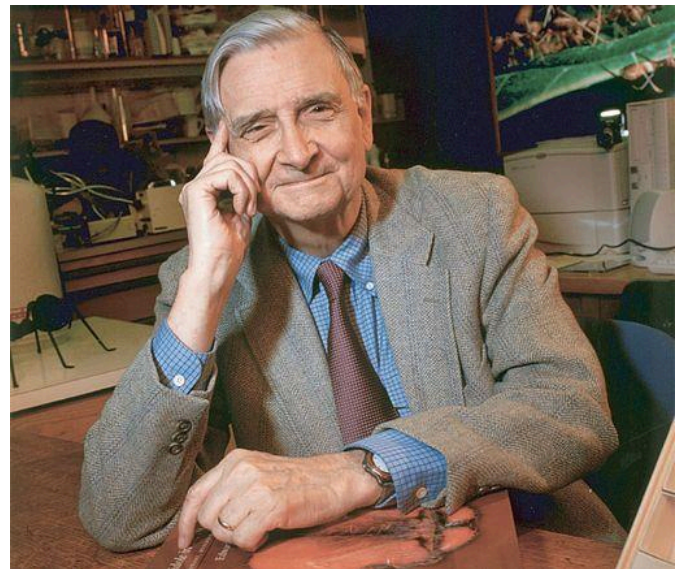
CHAPTER 8.

EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

MICHAEL KLENK

INTRODUCTION

As the world's leading ant expert, Edward Wilson could have led a tranquil and joyous academic life. But in his book *Sociobiology* from 1975, Wilson extended his work on evolutionary explanations of social behavior—which helped him a great deal in understanding the behavior of social animals like ants, bees, and horses—to human behavior. As Wilson later wrote, all of the book's 575 pages were well received but for the last, brief chapter on human evolution (Wilson 2002, vi). In that chapter, Wilson suggests that evolution could explain *moral* behavior in humans: humans are moral, prosocial animals because being moral and prosocial had evolutionary advantages. Indeed, he urged that “scientists and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized” (Wilson 2002, 562).



[Edward O. Wilson](#) by Jim Harrison via Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY 2.5](#)

Wilson's suggestion caused outrage far beyond the academic ivory tower. Many associated evolutionary theory with crude claims about the “survival of the fittest,” which some regimes used to justify wars and euthanasia, and they feared that approaching ethics from the evolutionary perspective would justify racism, sexism, and imperialism.¹ In effect, Wilson's academic life after the publication of the book was far from tranquil; his talks were controversial, shouted down by

1. Cf. Segerstrale (2000)

protesters, and at a conference in 1978, an opponent even expressed his dismay by emptying a can of water over him.

However, looking behind Wilson's sensational rhetoric of "removing ethics from the hands of the philosophers" we find a more level-headed claim about methodology in ethics (Wilson 2002, 562). Wilson called for studying ethics just as we study other social, psychological, or biological phenomena. In other words, Wilson called for a so-called naturalistic approach to ethical questions (which will be explained in further detail below). Of course, we can ask many different questions about ethics and, as we will see, some are more suited to a naturalistic approach than others. But the debate about the legitimacy of evolutionary ethics has largely abated in favor of Wilson's proposal. Many aspects of evolutionary ethics are thriving and have led to exciting research programs that have made tremendous progress since Wilson's book. And Wilson, rest assured, came out of the controversy emboldened and unscathed. It seems that he did lead a joyous academic life after all.

This chapter first introduces naturalistic approaches to ethics more generally and distinguishes methodological ethical naturalism (the focus of this chapter), from metaphysical ethical naturalism. The second part then discusses evolutionary ethics as a specific variant of methodological ethical naturalism. After introducing the concepts of evolutionary theory that are relevant for evolutionary ethics, I will sketch the history of evolutionary ethics, which offers an interesting lesson about why it became a controversial topic, and then focus on four central questions about ethics that can be approached from within the framework of evolutionary ethics:

1. What should we do?
2. Why are we moral?
3. Are there moral facts?
4. Can we have justified moral beliefs and moral knowledge?

TWO APPROACHES TO NATURALISM IN ETHICS: METHODOLOGICAL AND METAPHYSICAL

Wilson advocates methodological ethical naturalism, which is primarily a view about the best ways to study ethics. Naturalists in this sense argue that at least some ethical questions can be studied just as we try to answer questions in other fields of scientific inquiry. Ethics, in other words, is *continuous* with science.

A central commitment of methodological ethical naturalism is to widen the net of our sources for ethical inquiry. For example, we can use anthropological, psychological, biological, and literary sources to inform our theorizing about ethics.² Such a multitude of sources contrasts with the more traditional way of doing moral philosophy by conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis is a method often used by philosophers to investigate ethical questions. It involves reflection about when a concept, such as "goodness" or "freedom," applies and how it relates to other concepts. Using conceptual analysis to understand what moral goodness is, for example, means analyzing the conditions in which the concept "moral goodness" applies. Conceptual analysis is guided by one's

2. E.g. Kitcher (2011); Flanagan (2017); Appiah (2009)

understanding of and intuitions about the concept in question. Since much of the academic philosophy studied by North American and European philosophers still is, or has been, done by North Americans and Europeans (despite the fact that academic philosophy is being done in other parts of the world, too), many existing conceptual analyses of ethical terms are really conceptual analyses of Western concepts. However, psychologists and philosophers have argued that intuitions about (ethical) concepts vary quite significantly.³ If these claims are true, it would be a problem insofar as we want to learn what *moral goodness* is, rather than what the *concept of moral goodness of Western academics* is. Hence, the naturalist has a good case for taking into account more than just (predominantly Western) intuitions. Evolutionary thinking is one such source, and we will cover it in greater detail below.

In contrast to methodological naturalism, which is primarily a view about how to conduct ethical inquiry, metaphysical ethical naturalism is primarily a view of what exists. Both views are related but distinct, as an analogy with ghosts illustrates. It would be one thing to find out in scientifically respectable terms why people believe in ghosts, which would be methodological naturalism, but quite another to say what ghosts are in scientifically respectable terms, which would be the goal of the metaphysical naturalist.⁴

Metaphysical naturalists say that there are no non-natural or supernatural entities in this world. On most accounts of drawing the line between “natural” and the rest, this excludes God or gods, ghosts, human spirits, or a soul that is not part of the physical body. Morality seems to fall on the non-natural or supernatural side of things to many philosophers. One reason is that moral facts seem quite unlike ordinary facts about, say, the weather or geology, due to their normative force. To illustrate, if I state an ordinary fact like “Mitt went to the grocery store” or “gold is denser than iron,” I describe a state of the world, but I do not seem committed to acting in one way or another. In contrast, if I say “it is morally wrong that Mitt stole the money,” I not only describe the world, but also seem to commit myself to act in a certain way. It sounds strange to say, for example, that “it is morally wrong that Mitt stole the money but we should do nothing about it.” Moral facts, it seems, have a certain prescriptivity built into them, and this is one reason it seems that moral facts cannot straightforwardly be reduced to natural facts. (To wit, moral facts, such as the fact that killing is wrong, not only *describe* the world like other facts, but they also give reasons for acting, or *prescribe* certain courses of action.)

As a solution, some metaphysical naturalists abandon moral facts altogether. Since there are no moral facts at all on this view, this is, of course, a straightforward way to live up to one’s naturalistic aspirations.⁵ Typically, however, when moral philosophers speak about moral naturalism, they have in mind a version of metaphysical ethical naturalism that is committed to two theses. First, moral facts exist. Second, moral facts can be described in purely natural terms.⁶ For example, consider the moral theory utilitarianism (see [Chapter 5](#)). A simple version of utilitarianism holds that the only thing of intrinsic value is happiness and that our only obligation is to maximize happiness. On this

3. See Zamzow and Nichols (2009).

4. See Joyce (2016).

5. E.g. Mackie (1977; Ayer (1936)

6. E.g. Railton (1986); Brink (1989); Boyd (1988)

view, moral properties reduce to the property of being conducive to happiness, which is a psychological quality that fits quite well into the worldview provided by science.⁷ The major philosophical project of metaphysical naturalists is to explain how exactly moral facts relate to natural facts, which raises some fascinating issues.⁸ For present purposes, it is important to note that you can be a methodological naturalist without being committed either to one of the two forms of metaphysical naturalism or to metaphysical naturalism in general. That means you can embrace methodological naturalism but deny that there are only natural facts. From now on, we will focus on methodological naturalism, and in the next section, we will see how evolutionary ethics is a particular instance of methodological ethical naturalism.

EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS AS METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO NATURALISM IN ETHICS

Evolutionary Theory and Ethics

Evolutionary ethics takes into account the findings of human evolutionary psychology, a field of study that explores how evolutionary forces helped shape not only how humans function and what we look like (what evolutionary biologists call the human “phenotype”), but also how we behave, feel, and think.⁹ Evolutionary ethics is thus a way in which we can widen the net of sources that inform ethical inquiry.

Evolutionary psychology itself is based on the theory of evolution by natural selection applied to human beings, first described by Charles Darwin in 1871 in his book *The Descent of Man*. In this book, Darwin argued that we humans are the descendants of a “hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World” (Darwin 1871, 389).

Darwin’s theory describes natural selection as the differential survival and reproduction of individuals due to differences in phenotype. Natural selection is a key mechanism of evolution, the change in heritable traits of a population of individuals over time. Natural selection works similarly to artificial selection. Take a dog breeder, for example, who selects only docile dogs to breed. Over multiple generations, the dogs he breeds will get more and more docile. The major difference between artificial selection and natural selection is that natural selection does not have a “selector.” Instead, environmental conditions cause some phenotypes (and consequently, their genotypes) to be able to survive and reproduce better compared to their competitors. Organisms that are better adapted to the environment, perhaps through random mutations of their genetic code, are said to have a greater fitness as they have a greater chance of passing on their genes. Thus, over time, fitness-enhancing changes in the genotype spread in the next generation. The theory of evolution by natural selection provides the starting point for evolutionary ethics, as we will see in the next section.

7. See Joyce (2016).

8. See Railton (2017).

9. Some evolutionary biologists include these features in what they call the “extended phenotype.” See Dawkins (2016).

What Should We Do?

When Darwin published *The Descent of Man*, people immediately began to think about the relations between his theory of human evolution and ethics. One of the important early proponents of an ethical theory inspired by evolutionary theory was Herbert Spencer. Spencer, born in 1820 in England, argued that Darwin's evolutionary theory would not only *explain* but also *justify* moral behavior. He became known as the foremost defender of the branch of evolutionary ethics that attempts to deal with answers to the question what we ought to do (more on this below), and he was a key figure in popularizing Darwin's ideas in application to the study of ethics. A recollection by Frederick Pollock, who studied at Cambridge University in England during the height of Spencer's popularity, nicely illustrates the enthusiasm with which many adopted the new way of thinking about ethics:

We seemed to ride triumphant on an ocean of new life and boundless possibilities. Natural Selection was to be the master-key of the universe; we expected it to solve all riddles and reconcile all contradictions. Among other things it was to give us a new system of ethics, combining the exactness of the utilitarian with the poetical ideals of the transcendentalist. We were not only to believe joyfully in the survival of the fittest, but to take an active and conscious part in making ourselves fitter. (Clifford 1879, 33)

The research program inspired by Spencer provides an important lesson about the pitfalls of evolutionary ethics. (See the box on Social Darwinism for more details.) Spencer's followers thought that evolutionary theory could show that certain moral principles or rules are justified. Recall one of the core premises in evolutionary theory about the role of individual differences in natural selection. Fit phenotypes survive and reproduce more or better than unfit phenotypes. For this reason, many have thought that finding out what is evolutionarily successful shows us what is morally good. Darwin's theory has been, mistakenly, taken as a justification for the belief that it is right for the strong to crowd out the weak and that the only hope for human improvement lays in selective breeding.¹⁰

10. See Paul (2006).

Social Darwinism

Carrie Buck was a patient in the “Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded,” as it was called at the time. Upon a finding that she was “the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring, likewise afflicted, that she may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health, and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization,” the Court ruled that she could be sterilized without her consent (*Buck v. Bell* 274, U.S. 200, [1927]). In justifying the ruling, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously remarked that “three generations of imbeciles are enough” (Doerr 2009).

The court’s ruling cites the common good, and the alleged inability of Carrie Buck to contribute to it, as a justification for the ruling. Implicitly, the court assumes that “unproductive” people, by whatever measure, have fewer rights than “productive” people. Such assumptions were at the heart of a great many involuntary eugenics programs, which aimed at improving the genetic quality of the human population by policing and manipulation reproduction.

Eugenics programs are expressions of a mistaken, fallacious interpretation of evolutionary theory, which came to be known as “Social Darwinism.” Eugenics programs were widespread in the early twentieth century, and many were explicitly based on claims derived from evolutionary theory, such that only the strong should survive (Paul 2006).

However, such thinking betrays an argumentative fallacy known as an “appeal to nature.” For example, arguing that the use of contraceptives is morally wrong because they prevent the “natural” outcome of intercourse or that men should not do household chores because it is not in their nature are appeals to nature. Appeals to nature can be fallacious in mistakenly identifying something as “natural”—the example of men doing household chores illustrates this. Appeals to nature are fallacious in a strict logical sense, too, because they make an illegitimate step from *is* to *ought*. The illegitimacy of deriving an ought from an *is* has been emphasized by the Scottish philosopher David Hume, and we can call the prohibition against doing so *Hume’s Law*. Hume remarked:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. (Hume [1738] 2007, 302)

Hume deplors the unexplained, imperceptible change from *is* to *ought* in a moral argument, and such imperceptible and illegitimate steps were plentiful in some of the arguments by early proponents of evolutionary ethics. The problem was that Spencer and his followers sought to derive moral principles *directly* from evolutionary insights. The ferocious opposition to Wilson’s suggestion partly reflects the history of evolutionary ethics, as people feared more crude attempts at deriving an ought from an *is*.

Historically, the demise of early approaches to evolutionary ethics is most closely associated with the British philosopher G. E. Moore, who effectively put an end to the heydays of Spencer’s project in

1903. Moore's argument provides another instructive objection to evolutionary ethics. Moore charged Spencer and his followers with committing what he called the "naturalistic fallacy" (Moore [1903] 1988, 28). Moore was interested in the definition of "good" and argued that since "good" is a simple property, it cannot be defined by outlining its more basic properties. Thus, identifying "good" with "higher evolved" as Spencer did was to commit the naturalistic fallacy. The impact of what we can call "Moore's Challenge" has been devastating for evolutionary ethics. More than ninety years after Moore, the philosopher Michael Ruse observes that "it has been enough for the student to murmur the magical phrase 'naturalistic fallacy' and then he or she can move on to the next question, confident of having gained full marks thus far on the exam" (Ruse 1995, 220).

There is more to be said both about the strength of Hume's Law and about Moore's Challenge in particular. The takeaway at this point is that approaching normative questions about what we ought to do from within evolutionary ethics requires taking on both challenges. The lessons from the first century of evolutionary ethics are that the prospects for deriving normative principles from evolutionary theory are dim.

However, it is important to recognize that evolutionary ethics can still have implications for what we ought to do by telling us about where moral principles apply. To illustrate the difference between establishing *moral rules* and establishing *where moral rules apply*, consider norms about blame. It is one thing to establish the moral norm that you are blameworthy if you cause harm or offense when you could have done otherwise, and quite another to establish, in a specific case, whether Peter is blameworthy for using foul language that offended some people: after all, he could have Tourette syndrome, in which case he could not have done otherwise. The project of finding out more about the features that are relevant for moral evaluation, like our psychology, is thus of crucial importance for finding out where moral rules apply (so which specific things we ought to do), though it does not establish the moral rules themselves. It is also a bona fide methodological ethical naturalistic project. Moreover, evolutionary ethics can be very fruitfully applied to other relevant questions within ethics, as we will see in the next sections.

Why are We Moral?

Humans are astonishingly prosocial compared to other animals. The primatologist Sarah Hrdy illustrates this nicely:

Each year 1.6 billion passengers fly to destinations around the world. Patiently we line up to be checked and patted down by someone we've never seen before. We file on board an aluminum cylinder and cram our bodies into narrow seats, elbow to elbow, accommodating one another for as long as the flight takes. With nods and resigned smiles, passengers make eye contact and then yield to latecomers pushing past. When a young man wearing a backpack hits me with it as he reaches up to cram his excess paraphernalia into an overhead compartment, instead of grimacing or baring my teeth, I smile (weakly), disguising my irritation....I cannot keep from wondering what would happen if my fellow human passengers suddenly morphed into another species of ape. What if I were traveling with a planeload of chimpanzees? Any one of us would be lucky to disembark with all ten fingers and toes still attached, with the baby still breathing and unmaimed. Bloody earlobes and other appendages would litter the aisles. Compressing so many highly impulsive strangers into a tight space would be a recipe for mayhem. (Hrdy 2011, 1-4)

What Hrdy is getting at is that humans are a moral species, not in the sense that all of us are morally

good people (some are crooks, after all) but in the sense that normally functioning adults are capable of following the written and unwritten rules of society so that we can all get along. Importantly, we sometimes follow such rules even in the absence of credible threats of sanctions: sometimes, people return that lost wallet of cash, do not cheat even if they could get away with it, and decide to help people that live in far-away countries. And human children are extraordinarily attuned to attend to social cues—nothing interests them more than other humans, and they seem to be very concerned with fairness and other rules that we could classify as moral. But why are we moral? The philosopher Immanuel Kant famously attributed it to an inborn capacity:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. (Kant [1788] 2015, 129)

Referring to our moral sense alone, however, does not get us far along to an answer. For why do we have such a moral sense? After all, it is not only trained moral philosophers that behave respectfully and non-selfishly on airplanes. Examples of this behavior range from the mundane, such as honest behavior in circumstances where cheating would be impossible to detect, to the drastic, such as people that sacrifice their lives for others. How could such behavior have evolved?

Evolutionary ethics in a descriptive sense provides some answers. The hypothesis is that morality is a tool for cooperation. Being able to follow rules, to internalize them, and to stick to them even if it is against your immediate interests is what makes morality something that can be useful from an evolutionary perspective.

There are two competing hypotheses. The first takes a “gene’s eye’s view” on natural selection (Dawkins 2006). According to this view, natural selection occurs only on the level of individual organisms. Metaphorically speaking, think of your own body, and the traits that make it attractive to potential mates, as a vehicle for your genes to copy themselves into the next generation. So, to offer an evolutionary explanation of a certain trait, we have to understand why having that trait would have led to the organism’s spreading more of its genes into the next generation. At first glance, the gene’s eye view makes it puzzling why behavior such as sacrifice in war would evolve. After all, how would sacrificing yourself help you to spread your genes into the next generation? The biologist Richard Hamilton pointed out that behavior towards our kin would be beneficial even from the perspective of a selfish gene because we share many genes with our kin (Hamilton 1963). For example, helping your brother or sister is beneficial from your genes’ point of view, because you share 50% of your genes with your sibling. Of course, we also behave morally toward people outside our family, and so-called reciprocal altruism helps explain how such behavior could have evolved (Trivers 1971). Even though two individuals might be genetically unrelated, it pays for them to benefit the other as long as the favor is returned in the future so that, over the long run, both organisms enjoy individual fitness benefits. Therefore, from the gene’s eye view, our beliefs in obligations and duties, our ability to experience empathy towards others, to understand their intentions, and so forth, is seen as a product of selective pressures on the individual level.

Proponents of group-selectionist theories take a different perspective on the evolution of morality. According to this view, natural selection occurs also on the level of groups (as opposed to only on the level of individual organisms). Group selectionists do not deny the role of selection on the level of

the individual, but they emphasize that group selection is a key ingredient in the evolution of morality. As competition for resources between groups of hunter-gatherers intensified around 150,000 years ago, group cohesion and cooperation amongst group members became an important factor.¹¹ Groups with more cooperative individuals would have a better position in this struggle and, as we have seen, the ability to follow moral rules would be a way to increase cooperation. As groups with more cooperative individuals outcompeted groups with less cooperative individuals, the human population, in general, became more and more attuned to cooperative behavior, and this is why humans began to develop the moral psychology that characterizes us as moral animals today.

There are still many open questions between these two camps, and many concern the central events, processes, or mechanisms that enabled the evolution of morality (see the Cultural Evolution box). At the very least, evolutionary ethics as a descriptive project helps to explain the origins of some of the foundations of morality.

Cultural Evolution

Taboos are interestingly similar to moral norms: they are binding and do not allow for exceptions. The anthropologist John Henrich argues that taboos illustrate how culture played an important role in our evolutionary history (Henrich 2016). For example, for female inhabitants of Yasawa Island (Fiji) it is taboo to eat larger fish such as moray eels, barracuda, or sharks when they are pregnant. The taboo is based on tradition and religious beliefs and adhering to the taboo seems like a significant constraint because the taboo fish make up a large part of the ordinary diet of most Yasawa islanders, including pregnant women.

Why do pregnant Yasawa women remove such an important source of calories from their diet? The short answer is that their culturally transmitted beliefs tell them to do so. That they are on the right track can be understood from the perspective of Western medicine, too. By removing large fish from their menu, pregnant women run a lower risk of ciguatera poisoning. Ciguatera toxin is produced by a marine microorganism and as it gets eaten by small fish, and those fish by yet bigger fish, the toxin produced by the microorganism can reach dangerous levels in large fish like barracuda (Henrich 2016, 128).

Norms about food are transmitted socio-culturally and the anthropologist Joseph Henrich uses the fish-taboo case to illustrate that culture played a crucial role in the evolution of humans and human morality (Henrich 2016, 100-102). Think of culture as a set of explicit or implicit rules and ways of doing things. Culture in this sense is intangible and yet part of our tangible environment: if you violate an implicit rule, others might punish you for it. According to Henrich, “cultural evolution initiated a process of self-domestication, driving genetic evolution to make us prosocial, docile, rule followers who expect a world governed by social norms monitored and enforced by communities (Henrich 2016, 5).

Just as culture in the form of, say, taboos about poisonous food can drive genetic evolution, it may constitute an environment which requires individuals to be attuned to the social rules and thereby favors individuals who are better able to follow the rules. Culture might thus be an important component in the evolution of morality.

11. See Tomasello (2016).

Are there Moral Facts?

So far, we have covered how evolutionary ethics relates to the question what we ought to do and why we are moral in the first place. A related set of questions about ethics are metaethical questions, which concern the meaning of moral terms, our ways of gaining knowledge of moral facts, and the nature of the moral facts. In other words, apart from thinking about how we ought to live, and where our moral sense comes from, we can also ask what it *means* to affirm a particular answer to that question, how we could come to *know* the answer, and whether the answer would be a matter of fact or more like an opinion.

Many books and articles in moral philosophy start with the observation that moral judgments seem to be objectively true and the assumption that this is how non-philosophers also think about morality. For example, Michael Smith writes:

We seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts; that moral facts are wholly determined by circumstances; and that, by engaging in moral conversation and argument, we can discover what these objective facts are. (Smith 1994, 6)

But as we have seen above, evolutionary theory explains why we would think that moral judgments are objective. The philosopher Michael Ruse takes this to show that the apparent objectivity of morality is something like an “illusion” foisted on us by our genes (Ruse [1986] 1998, 253). Of course, even if Ruse is correct, this does not show that moral judgments are *not* objective, but it can make us think whether the objectivity of morality really has to be explained, as many philosophers assume. Ruse has also argued that an evolutionary account of morality suggests that there are no moral facts in the first place. Anything we want to explain about morality can be explained without mentioning moral facts, or so Ruse argues. If moral facts are explanatorily redundant, indeed, moral realists (those who believe there are mind-independent, objective facts about morality, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#)) need to say why we should still suppose that moral facts do exist. Interestingly, Ruse’s methodological naturalism leads him to embrace a view that goes against the metaphysical naturalist position that moral facts exist.

Relatedly, Sharon Street, for example, argues that evolutionary explanations of morality show that moral realism is probably false. The kind of moral realism that Street has in mind is the view that moral properties exist as objective features of the world (to wit, whether stealing is wrong is independent of whether anyone thinks or feels that stealing is wrong). Street starts with the premise that our moral judgments are influenced by evolutionary forces. This fact, Street claims, gives rise to a dilemma for moral realists concerning the relation of the evolutionary forces that influenced our moral judgments and the moral facts claimed to exist by moral realists. If there is no relation between the evolutionary forces and the moral facts, then it would be an astonishing coincidence if many of our moral judgments were true. In light of the coincidence, we have no reason to assume that our moral judgments are true—an unpalatable conclusion for realists. Claiming that there is a relation, however, is empirically dubious, according to Street. Mirroring Ruse’s claim, moral facts could be purged from what we assume to exist because they do not perform an important explanatory function. So, we should reject moral realism. Street’s argument illustrates how evolutionary theory can be used to make a case about which metaethical theories we should adopt.

Both Ruse's and Street's arguments rely on the idea that we should only accept that something exists if it plays an indispensable explanatory role and there are means to resist these arguments.¹² Both arguments, as presented here, rely on the correctness of the evolutionary explanation of morality they convey. In the next section, we turn to the relevance of evolutionary ethics for moral epistemology.

Can We have Justified Moral Beliefs?

The evolutionary argument by Sharon Street can also be interpreted as an argument about moral justification and moral knowledge. Suppose that moral realists assume that there is no relation between our moral judgments and the moral facts. It would seem like an incredible coincidence if the realists were right that our moral judgments are nonetheless true. There are just too many possible moral truths and too many ways in which evolution could have "pushed" our moral beliefs. Street claims that such a coincidence would be too much to believe. But what is the problem, exactly, with having beliefs that are only coincidentally true? Depending on how we understand "coincidence," my belief that there is a bird outside my window is coincidentally true because had I looked a little later, the bird would have flown away already. Accidentally true beliefs do not seem problematic in every case. The question for proponents of Street's argument is to show why the evolutionary influence on human moral beliefs makes for a particularly problematic case of coincidence.

The philosopher Richard Joyce argues that the problem has to do with the sensitivity of our moral beliefs to the moral facts (Joyce 2006). Given that our moral beliefs are influenced by evolutionary forces, and not by the moral facts, our moral beliefs would be the same even if the moral facts would change. But because we should not hold on to such insensitive beliefs, evolutionary explanations of morality show that our moral beliefs are unjustified (because they are not sensitive).

It is not clear, however, whether and why evolutionary explanations of morality reveal something about our moral beliefs that is particularly troubling from an epistemological perspective. The impact of evolutionary ethics on epistemological questions depends on these deeper questions about epistemology.¹³ Evolutionary explanations of morality, however, provide us with a useful starting point for thinking about these questions.

CONCLUSION

Evolutionary ethics has helped us to get a much clearer sense of where the human moral sense is coming from. While this is a far cry from revealing to us what we ought to do, the research program seems full of promise nonetheless. Once we get into the details, we can see that it also raises deep theoretical questions about evolutionary explanations, the relation of descriptive and normative claims, the epistemology of justification and truth, and the general viability of naturalism in ethics. Much left to wonder, then, but with some ideas about where to get our answers.

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12. E.g. Enoch (2010)

13. See Klenk (2019).

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We would also like to acknowledge **the many philosophy students, faculty and researchers** who have contributed to the project by providing comments along the way, such as discussions on the Rebus Community platform when we were originally envisioning the series and what topics should be included, as well as giving feedback on drafts of chapter outlines for books. There have been many very helpful contributions from too many people to list here, and the books would not have come together without them.

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This book has been peer reviewed by two subject experts. The full-text received an open review from the reviewers, based on their area of expertise.

The review was structured around considerations of the intended audience of the book, and examined the comprehensiveness, accuracy, and relevance of content, as well as longevity and cultural relevance. Further review by the series editor and the copy editor focused on clarity, consistency, organization structure flow, and grammatical errors. See the [review guide](#) for more details. Changes suggested by the reviewers were incorporated by chapter authors and the book editor.

George Matthews (book editor), Christina Hendricks (series editor) and authors Frank Aragbonfoh Abumere, Douglas Giles, Ya-Yun Kao, Michael Klenk, Joseph Kranak, Kathryn MacKay, Jeff Morgan, Paul Rezkalla, and the team at Rebus would like to thank the reviewers for the time, care, and commitment they contributed to the project. We recognise that peer reviewing is a generous act of service on their part. This book would not be the robust, valuable resource that it is were it not for their feedback and input.

Peer reviewers:

Björn Freter, Independent Scholar, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

Vance Ricks, Guildford College, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

ACCESSIBILITY ASSESSMENT

A NOTE FROM THE REBUS COMMUNITY

We are working to create a new, collaborative model for publishing open textbooks. Critical to our success in reaching this goal is to ensure that all books produced using that model meet the needs of all students who will one day use them. To us, open means inclusive, so for a book to be open, it must also be accessible.

As a result, we are working with accessibility experts and others in the OER community to develop best practices for creating accessible open textbooks, and are building those practices into the Rebus model of publishing. By doing this, we hope to ensure that all books produced using the Rebus Community are accessible by default, and require an absolute minimum of remediation or adaptation to meet any individual student's needs.

While we work on developing guidelines and implementing support for authoring accessible content, we are making a good faith effort to ensure that books produced with our support meet accessibility standards wherever possible, and to highlight areas where we know there is work to do. It is our hope that by being transparent on our current books, we can begin the process of making sure accessibility is top of mind for all authors, adopters, students and contributors of all kinds on all our open textbook projects.

Below is a short assessment of eight key areas that have been assessed during the production process. The [checklist](#) has been drawn from the [BCcampus Open Education Accessibility Toolkit](#). While a checklist such as this is just one part of a holistic approach to accessibility, it is one way to begin our work on embedded good accessibility practices in the books we support.

Wherever possible, we have identified ways in which anyone may contribute their expertise to improve the accessibility of this text.

We also welcome any feedback from students, instructors or others who encounter the book and identify an issue that needs resolving. This book is an ongoing project and will be updated as needed. If you would like to submit a correction or suggestion, please do so using the [Introduction to Philosophy series accessibility suggestions form](#).

ACCESSIBILITY CHECKLIST

Accessibility Checklist

Category	Item	Status
Organizing Content	Content is organized under headings and subheadings	Yes
Organizing Content	Headings and subheadings are used sequentially (e.g. Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.) as well as logically (if the title is Heading 1 then there should be no other Heading 1 styles as the title is the uppermost level)	Yes
Images	Images that convey information include Alternative Text (alt-text) descriptions of the image's content or function	N/A
Images	Graphs, charts, and maps also include contextual or supporting details in the text surrounding the image	N/A
Images	Images do not rely on colour to convey information	Yes
Images	Images that are purely decorative contain empty alternative text descriptions. (Descriptive text is unnecessary if the image doesn't convey contextual content information)	Yes
Tables	Tables include row and column headers	Yes
Tables	Tables include a title or caption	Yes
Tables	Tables do not have merged or split cells	Yes
Tables	Tables have adequate cell padding	Yes
Weblinks	The weblink is meaningful in context, and does not use generic text such as "click here" or "read more"	Yes
Weblinks	Where URLs are spelled out, such as in lists of references or footnotes, ARIA labels are used	Yes
Weblinks	Weblinks do not open new windows or tabs	Yes
Weblinks	If weblinks must open in a new window, a textual reference is included in the link information	N/A
Embedded Multimedia	A transcript has been made available for a multimedia resource that includes audio narration or instruction	N/A
Embedded Multimedia	Captions of all speech content and relevant non-speech content are included in the multimedia resource that includes audio synchronized with a video presentation	N/A
Embedded Multimedia	Audio descriptions of contextual visuals (graphs, charts, etc.) are included in the multimedia resource	N/A
Formulas	Formulas have been created using MathML	N/A
Formulas	Formulas are images with alternative text descriptions, if MathML is not an option	N/A
Font Size	Font size is 12 point or higher for body text	Yes
Font Size	Font size is 9 point for footnotes or endnotes	Yes
Font Size	Font size can be zoomed to 200%	Yes

VERSION HISTORY

This page provides a record of edits and changes made to this book since its initial publication. Whenever edits or updates are made in the text, we provide a record and description of those changes here. If the change is minor, the version number increases by 0.1. If the edits involve substantial updates, the edition number increases to the next whole number.

The files posted alongside this book always reflect the most recent version. If you find an error in this book, please let us know in the [Rebus Community platform](#). (You could instead fill out [an error reporting form for the book](#), though we prefer the discussion platform so others can see if the error has already been reported.)

We will contact the author, make the necessary changes, and replace all file types as soon as possible. Once we receive the updated files, this Version History page will be updated to reflect the edits made.

VERSION HISTORY

Version History

Version	Date	Change	Affected Page(s)
1.0	December 9, 2019	Original	
1.1	January 4, 2020	Added custom CSS so hyperlink URLs would show on print PDF versions (in parentheses after the hyperlinked text)	Pages with hyperlinks
1.2	January 12, 2020	Added ARIA labels where URLs are spelled out in lists of references, suggested readings, & footnotes	Pages with hyperlinked URLs in references, suggested readings, or footnotes