

A Brief History of Ethics

Jennifer Downs

In civilized life, law floats in a sea of ethics.

Earl Warren¹

How ought one live? This question represents the foundation of centuries of debate concerning the philosophy of ethics, a subject that writers from every country across every generation have discussed, dispelled, and posited their thoughts on without yet reaching a consensus. The voices in this dialogue are cross-referential, building upon and responding to preceding theories as each philosopher takes their distinct stance on morality. The idea of good and evil has been filtered through multitudinous perspectives, allowing for questions not only on the goodness of actions but the use, rightness, morality, and justness of actions.

For the ancient Greeks, the code of moral correctness was represented by the epics. Writers like Homer sang the praises of virtuous men, holding such characters up as paradigms of virtuous action. It is evident in the *Odyssey* that these heroes looked to the pantheon of Greek gods as their resource for right living. Regardless of true belief in the existence of such beings, the characteristics of the various deities, as outlined in myth, informed the actions of heroes like Odysseus.

[...] t is clear that Homer invokes the gods in order to account for the observation that a central form of human excellence must be drawn from without. A god, in Homer's terminology, is a mood that attunes us to what matters most in a situation, allowing us to respond appropriately without thinking.²

In this way, the Greeks had a model to inform their own behavior and by which to judge others. Since the fall of ancient Greece, other philosophers have taken an opposing stand, insisting that morality is a relative feature of the individual – that no preset code applies to all people in all circumstances.

The changes in ethical philosophy over the years reflect sociological shifts that, in responding to contemporaneous events, intellectually summarize the social understandings and reactions to socio-political changes. Despite the constant flux of thought, at a very base level, ethics strives for a cohesive society. Philosophers describe their ideal; the most functional and productive structure of society, thus laying out their best

plan to achieve such an end. Whether the source of ideal cohesion rests in the individual or the community at large has yet to be determined, but the debate continues.

1. META-ETHICS: WHAT DOES “RIGHT” MEAN?

Meta-ethics is concerned with the epistemology of ethics, posing conceptual questions to define the origins and limitations of ethical statements and challenging the use of moral predicates. Fundamentally, this is a branch of philosophy concerned with the inherent existence and man’s understanding of “goodness”, and addresses this concept through conceptual and epistemological questions.

The advent of meta-ethical theory is tied to increased interest in linguistic philosophy at the outset of the 20th century.³ We utilize moral predicates like “good/evil” and “right/wrong” in association with behavior to define our understanding of the ethical nature of a given action. Initially, a moral verdict like “it is wrong to cheat”, seems like a simple deduction, yet the parameters of “wrong” have not been defined, so there is no value to this statement. Meta-ethics attempts, in various ways, to provide the necessary parameters in order that a valid ethical conclusion be reached.

The most crucial debate within meta-ethics is the source and meaning of human values. For objectivists, values are innate, existing regardless of human comprehension. Because these values are inherent in the world, they are knowable, and ought to universally govern human behavior.

Alternately, relativists conclude that the values we attribute to things are defined differently, depending upon the environment of the definer, and so these values cannot be granted absolute meaning. An individual’s understanding of “right” and “wrong” is true relative to their experience. For this reason values do not have collective definitions and cannot be universally employed. From the relativists’ perspective comes the question of how to make moral judgments without a definite framework. This non-cognitivist branch of meta-ethics proposes that the application of moral predicates correlates with our application of emotional conditions. Within a certain environment, death makes us feel bad, we expand this feeling to perpetuate a moral absolute that all death is inherently “bad”. This emotion takes on an inscrutable moral quality so that the position “capital punishment is morally bad” is inscrutable by extension. Non-cognitivists propose that this type of association is the basis for all positions of morality, meaning that truth is relative to personal opinion shaped by experience: thus there is no absolute truth.

It is commonplace to assume that the questions of meta-ethics are logically prior to those of normative and applied ethics, and that there is no use proceeding with either normative or applied moral philosophy without coming to certain definite conclusions about matters of meta-ethical concern, but this assumption has also been disputed. For one may be right in regarding moral statements as cognitive and moral argument as possible without having any sort of elaborate meta-ethical theory to justify this view.⁴

2. NORMATIVE ETHICS: HOW OUGHT PEOPLE TO ACT?

What meta-ethics defines as objectivism relates to a branch of philosophy called normative ethics. Here the universality of values is accepted and a rational justification for these values is sought. Normative ethics is concerned with paradigms of ethical behavior and operates in a prescriptive manner, establishing moral absolutes by which society should live. The maxim known as the “Golden Rule” is an ideal representation of normative application, as some version of this principle has been represented in most societies throughout history. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the rule teaches that one ought to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”⁵ defining good behavior as the treatment one would expect for one’s self. Normative ethics can be further broken down to four theories, as follows:

Virtue ethics focuses on the moral state of the individual as the source of ethical behavior, rather than compliance to an external code of conduct. The morality of an individual comes from their internal character, which is reflected in the decisions they make, therefore the actions they choose to perform are less important than the justification for their behavior. Proponents claim that this approach:

*Offers a more unified and comprehensive conception of moral life, one that extends beyond actions to comprise wants, goals, likes and dislikes, and, in general, what sort of person one is and aims to be.*⁶

Deontological ethics, having its root in the Greek *deon*, or “duty”, determines morality based on adherence to rules. Actions have intrinsic moral implications, and ought to coincide with an individual’s moral obligations, regardless of the consequences associated with such action. There are many theories regarding deontology, but they:

*have in common the basic premise that the right is prior to the good and that beneficial results do not determine one’s moral duty. They emphasize fidelity to principle and the independence of rightness, which is the main focus of moral life.*⁷

In opposition to deontology is teleology, with the Greek root *telos* meaning “goal”, wherein what is right is determined by what is good. Here morality is determined by the consequences of action. C.D. Broad defined the modern understanding of teleological ethics writing that they:

*hold that the rightness or wrongness of an action is always determined by its tendency to produce certain consequences which are intrinsically good or bad.*⁸

Right action can be determined as that which yields the greatest good for the greatest number. This philosophy can be seen in various permutations in the practice of utilitarianism, egoism, hedonism, intellectualism, welfarism, etc.

The final branch of normative ethics is pragmatism, which suggests that morality is in a state of constant evolution, in a similar way to scientific knowledge. Over the

course of many generations, advances are made, and our understanding of what is right changes to reflect new ways of thinking.

Out of native impulses, some desires arise, leading to actions that form habits. Habits “constitute the self”, becoming one’s character. They lead to certain kinds of further action that may cause re-evaluation of past desires, a transformation or enlargement of them with respect to their objects, or a deepening of their meaning with broadened experience.⁹

This theory views character as an active process which can be influenced or manipulated through experience, therefore social reforms should be implemented to provide socially significant lives.

3. APPLIED ETHICS: HOW DO PEOPLE IMPLEMENT MORAL KNOWLEDGE?

The application of ethical theory in practical situations falls under the category of applied ethics. Unlike meta-ethics, where the aim is to understand the nature of moral concepts, or normative ethics which explores moral “norms”, the field of applied ethics pertains to the use of ethics to mediate real-life conflicts between what distinct parties view as right and wrong. It is difficult to find a situation free of ethical concerns, yet applied ethics is a relatively recent addition to the field.

The importance of applied ethics became obvious first in the medical context, where in the aftermath of World War II and the expanding interest in human rights, developments in technology gave rise to challenging ethical issues such as the use of transplant technology and the allocation of scarce resources such as kidney dialysis.¹⁰

In any instance where group or individual interests conflict, it is necessary to look to ethical theory for a resolution: business, law, government, medicine, science, religion, sports, etc. The modern interest in how to pursue what is “right” in such a comprehensive manner, bringing ethics and the impetus for equality into so many aspects of life, proves our desire to strive for the greater good. As Albert Einstein urged, one ought to “try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.”¹¹

4. MORAL PSYCHOLOGY: WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT WHAT IS RIGHT?

Moral psychology can refer to one of two fields, the first of which is the study of the development of the moral choices of the individual over time, and the second is the overlap between psychology and ethics, where the mind bears relevance to morals.

[...] Many normative theorists have maintained that there is a close connection between pleasure, happiness, or desire-satisfaction and a person’s good, and these things are also a concern of philosophy of the mind. In addition, the rightness of actions is often held to be closely connected to the motives, beliefs, and other psychological phenomena that lie behind those actions.¹²

The interest here lies in the thoughts of an individual, what they define as “right/wrong” and how they reach these conclusions.

Moral psychology has had a revival in the second half of the twentieth century. It involves work done both by empirical psychologists and philosophers and is devoted to reflection on how morals are acquired or developed, the role of emotions in moral life, how resistance to evil is inculcated, and so on.¹³

This kind of research does not uphold any ethical theories as absolute, rather it explores the ways in which individuals and groups engage with ethical concerns.

5. DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS: WHAT DO PEOPLE PROFESS IS RIGHT?

Descriptive ethics is simply the study of what people do believe or have believed about social morality and how those beliefs are implemented in action. As a discipline, it relies heavily on sociology and anthropology to relate the beliefs from variant cultural groups, from which one can extrapolate future behavior. This method can also be applied to ethical codes implemented in a professional environment. Like moral psychology, this is not a field that promotes any particular ethical belief; rather it interprets those pre-existing as they are implemented.

5.1 Old Testament (1200–100 BCE)

The earliest recorded code of ethics is found in the Tanakh and Talmud, the sacred scriptures of the Hebrews which were transcribed beginning in 1200 BCE. These writings document the history of these peoples within a moral context. Moral understanding for early Jews was inextricably combined with their belief in Yahweh. The Jewish expression of faith is founded in a complex system of social laws known as the *halakah*, wherein right action (“morality”) is a reflection of one’s obedience to God. Jewish philosophy is reflective in nature; one ought to behave in the likeness of God’s holiness or “*kadosh*”.

As God is merciful, forgiving, just, and kind, so his people must be merciful forgiving, just, and kind.¹⁴

This sociotheocratic belief system sees Yahweh as the moral epicenter for all mankind, pointing to the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) as a succinct form of the highest ethical code for all men.

5.2 Hinduism (100–400 BCE)

Hindu literature dates as far back as 1000 BCE, promoting ethics as a means to *moksa*, or liberation from the cycle of reincarnation. The ultimate deity in this religion is Brahmin, the impersonal expression of absolute truth to which all men should aspire.

Hinduism assigns four distinct stages to life, each with increasing moral demands. In the first stage, that of the student, sensory pleasure is given the highest significance. In the second stage this self-indulgence gives way to increased self-control as the individual shifts focus to the faculties of the householder. The third segment of life turns to the more religious focus of the wandering beggar where the individual pursues thorough religious understanding (dharma). The final stage is a continuation of this religious pursuit characterized by an even stricter practice of meditation. It is by means of this advanced meditation, where the individual is in union with the Ultimate, that universal wisdom may be known. The unity of life that this reveals insists upon a culture of non-violence. In the interrelation of all life morality is universal.

The Upanishads, the conclusion of the earliest Hindu texts, express the ultimate goal of life as unity with Brahmin which, it is written, can only be achieved through moral actions. The four stages of life reflect the ethical refinement necessary for the individual to achieve freedom.

The Bhagavad Gita is the central ethical text in Hinduism. It portrays a conversation between Lord Krsna and the warrior Arjuna. In the “divine song”, Krsna proposes the fundamental relativism that correctness should dictate each course of action.

5.3 Taoism (800–200 BCE)

In the 6th century BCE *The Tao Te Ching* or *The Way and its Power* emerged, establishing the basis of what would later become known as Taoism. This Chinese philosophy is attributed to the philosopher Lao Tzu and promotes retreat from society as a means of attaining social and personal harmony. According to Taoists, life ought to be lived in harmony with nature, in simplicity and spontaneity. Society, though, has become increasingly complex and man’s innate goodness has been obscured by desire, subsequently society has adopted morals in an effort to cope with the vices of desire. But imposing moral rules merely exacerbates social ills and cannot get at the real root of the problem. Indeed, morality should be abandoned for

*it is better for fish to live in water and be able to forget about each other than to be on a dry road and have to moisten each other with their spit.*¹⁵

In short, it is more preferable to live by the virtue of Tao than by forced virtue.

At its core, Taoism espouses a necessary balance between opposites. In Western culture this is most familiarly represented by the taijitu, or yin–yang. This symbol houses two opposite components, each containing necessary aspects of one another, both propelled in tandem.

Neither aspect of the taijitu can exist without the other; so it is in nature that all things move in an eternal, interconnected rhythm. By this same principle, good and evil are interdependent; one cannot exist without the other.

5.4 Zhuangzi (c. 300 BCE)

Contemporaneously, the philosopher Zhuangzi discounted the alternative philosophies of his contemporaries in favor of Taoism, upholding the idea that all things exist in balance and therefore no idea can be promoted over another because of relative nature of experience. In his writings Zhuangzi expanded on the work of his predecessor Lao Tzu, also promoting simplicity as the means to attain Tao. His theory shifted the focus of the Tao from a dichotomy between good and evil to relativism, contending that the universe does not operate by absolutes. As for societal laws, Chuang Cho proposed that it is impossible to know what is best for someone else and so vague values should not be imposed. He maintains the relativistic philosophy of allowing individuals to determine right and wrong according to their own barometer, not dispelling a sense of morality in actions, but warning against an absolute code.

5.5 Confucianism (c. 500 BCE)

Confucius, as a member of the newly created Chinese literati, wrote in response to the many feudal states struggling to maintain existence, as an unprecedented social revolution allowed commoners to take on positions of political import. His philosophy grew from the instability of the government which he perceived as the moral degeneration of its rulers. *The Analects* lays out his idealized feudalism; Confucius proposed a familial aristocracy in which the king represented the father, a role model for the citizens or children. If kings upheld their role as moral leaders, laws would not be required. The chun tzu (superior people) were Confucius's first followers, his ideal citizens, elite scholars and were taught to embody a universal good.

The concepts of *jen* and *li* are central to Confucianism. Humanity or *jen* is manifest in the love of others which leads to right behavior. One must not treat others in an undesirable manner. *Li*, on the other hand, is action in keeping with tradition or rules of conduct. According to Confucius, a government is ideally moral, holding in highest regard the interest of the people, which in turn inspires the citizens to aspire to the moral ideal.

As feudalism continued to decline, his student Mencius extended the responsibilities of the leaders to include social welfare and employment of the most qualified officials rather than those of the highest birthright. In so doing, Mencius dispelled the idea of a hereditary aristocracy in favor of an educated electorate. The greatest addition to Chinese philosophy from Mencius was the belief in the innate goodness of mankind, illustrated in the famous allegory of the well. Mencius postulates that there are four "hearts" compelling action: compassion, shame, ritual, and wisdom. In the instance of a child falling into a well, man would universally and spontaneously be compelled toward sympathy, an impulse unmotivated by self-interest. Evil, he continues, only exists in the lack of cultivation of these shared impulses. Thus morality is an innate component of existence which can be developed via good deeds.

The next major Confucian sage Hsun Tzu expanded on human morality, postulating that man is inherently evil, and that he only submits to “good” behavior as a form of social self-preservation. He rejected a dependence upon any external force of being, instead proposing individual reliance on proper conduct. Opposing Mencius, he taught that although humans are born evil (or “uncivilized”) it is within their power to control their animalistic impulses and desires through self-cultivating education.

5.6 Sophism (c. 400 BCE)

The foundation of Western philosophy can be traced to the Grecian empire, culminating in the Athenian philosophers of the 5th century BCE. As was true of China, a socio-political shift was the catalyst for novel ethical theory. During this time there was a shift away from disparate *agrarian monarchies* to a more centralized *industrial democracy*. Athens became the hub of commerce and intellect in the ancient world. A group of teachers known as the Sophists capitalized on this newly realized need for education by providing fee-based courses on a variety of subjects. At the core of this movement was the rejection of dependence upon traditional custom as a justification for behavior. The philosopher Protagoras epitomized the group’s attitude of relativism in his dictum the “man is the measure of all things” and so there can be no objective truth. Cultural customs, then, are useful only in that they represent agreed upon laws established from experience, but have no inherent truth and may be challenged. What is right and wrong is subjective, based on personal or social beliefs rather than inherent fact.

5.7 Socrates (c. 469–399 BCE)

Socrates rejected the Sophist’s argument of moral relativism, advancing the transition of Greek philosophy to one of self-awareness by which moral absolutes could be objectively identified. Unlike the Sophists, he believed that ethical verities were not only universal, but were able to be identified, learned, and improved upon within the individual. For this reason, life needed to be examined in minute detail in order to be lived well.

As with any task, there is always a method to attaining the best results. In shipbuilding, there is a proper and knowable strategy to creating an excellent ship. So in life the goal should be to attain such wisdom as will lead one to live a morally excellent life. Only in this way, through careful examination, can one flourish to one’s full potential. Desires are rationally generated by whatever is seen as most valuable. Having attained intellectual wisdom it would be impossible not to abide by it: one would not be able to commit some evil, since what is most valuable is the virtue of the soul which only engenders moral desires. Socrates proposed that evil could only be committed in error, when an individual mistakenly values the wrong things. It is more important to view the long-term effects of one’s actions rather than any short-term gain. So the importance

of morality is not for the benefit of a society but for the internal well-being of the individual.

5.7.1 Euthyphro Problem

Calling into question the relevance of traditional custom, Socrates opened the door for ethical debate. If it was not sufficient for a man to base his own custom, by what parameter could he base his morality? This dilemma became the crux of Sophocles' dialogues. For him, the unexamined life was not worth living and so it is necessary to remove the crutches of tradition to truly understand behavior. The longevity of Socrates' philosophy lies in his thorough simplicity. On the subject of divine command, he poses two quandaries. First, if what dictates ethical action is the approval of a deity, then there must be some absolute ethic that pre-exists divine authority. By this argument, a deity does not determine what is ethical but merely goes along with some greater authority. The second option would be that a divine source determines what is ethical on an individual basis and so morality is based on the caprice of the gods. Since, for Socrates, neither option is a reasonable solution, then ethical commands cannot be sourced from some abstract authority. This inquisition is Socrates' approach to explaining the difficulty in establishing a relationship between facts and values. Socrates identifies himself with those interlocutors who question him, conveying that he, too, lacks sufficient knowledge to provide absolute explanations of ethical quandaries.

5.8 Socrates and Plato (427–347 BCE)

There are no extant texts of Socrates. What is known of his philosophical teachings and subsequent trial and execution has been preserved in the writings of his students, most famously the early works of Plato. It is important to bear in mind that as he gained notoriety of his own Plato maintained use of the character "Socrates" while moving away from his predecessor's teachings in his later works (see below).

After Socrates was tried and executed for corrupting Greek youth through his impious rejection of divine authority, his student Plato took on his teachings. After he established the Socratic method of self-examination in his early writing, Plato expanded the philosophy of Socrates to encompass why the individual is capable of obtaining the knowledge that will allow man to live justly. The soul is constantly in the act of reacquiring previous knowledge that has since been forgotten in the human form. There exist in the universe two influences. First, there are physical objects which are temporal and sensory; they are a poor basis for knowledge because they appeal to the whims of human senses. Second, there are the eternal, incorruptible Forms in the universe (i.e., ethics and mathematics); these are the ascetic and intellectual truths which require self-discipline and denial of sensory pleasure to attain. At the center of this group is the Form of Good by which all else must be measured.

In *The Republic*, Plato echoes the thoughts of Mencius, stating that the people ought to be a reflection of the ethics of their government. Plato, too, outlined four cardinal virtues of human nature: temperance, wisdom, courage, and justice. Operating in harmony the first three virtues ought to culminate in the final virtue. Accordingly, justice is contingent upon the agent, be it an individual or government. Plato proposed an ideal society, by which justice could be seen in a larger context and then understood by the individual. In such a society, each citizen would be trained in the task to which they are best suited and would be governed by “philosopher kings”, leaders who would be strictly educated in the Form of the Good to benefit the populace. In this structure, with every component functioning to the best of its ability, justice is the only logical result.

5.9 Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Plato was succeeded by a student of his academy, Aristotle. In his work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, he focused on the need to exercise the knowledge of good, outlining a practical guide for individuals working to live virtuously. Unlike his predecessor, Aristotle rejected an overarching Form of Good, and instead taught that each item, practice, or individual has a distinct ultimate goodness. He believed that, generally, man knows what he ought to do in an ethical dilemma. For Aristotle, there was no value in simply knowing what choice is virtuous and choosing to act accordingly; rather the desires and the judgments of the virtuous agent ought to be in harmony so that the agent may experience real happiness. The difference between the morally weak and morally strong individual lies only in their behavior, not in their desires. Further, he taught that this kind of moral virtue is not an attainable skill but an innate balance; a postulation that undermines what he purported as necessary for happiness. But, Aristotle continued, one can become virtuous by imitating the acts of virtuous individuals for “we are what we repeatedly do”.

5.10 Summation of the Greeks

Socrates was the first to recognize the need to define ethical concepts and attempt to establish a universal standard. Plato found his standard in immutable, universal abstractions and goodness is measured by his ideal Form. Aristotle turned to practical application whereby happiness is achieved through right action. Social and individual good are interrelated. The latter philosophers drew conclusions about *moral culpability*. For Plato morally wrong decisions are made in error due to lack of knowledge. In addition to such errors, Aristotle adds the possibility of choosing to do wrong. For him happiness is well-being.

5.11 Epicurus (c. 342–270 BCE)

Epicurus expanded Socrates’ *Euthyphro problem* contending that if deities do exist they are free from the ethical dilemmas of man. He based his hedonistic theories in