

# *Philosophical Ethics*

*debating right and wrong*  
*[under construction]*



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

# *A Moral Dilemma*

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## *the runaway trolley*

You are standing near a switch next a railroad track when you notice a runaway trolley coming down the tracks in your direction. There are five children playing on the track below too far away to hear you. There is one worker on the other track where the trolley would go if you threw the switch.

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- *Would you throw the switch?*

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- *Would* you throw the switch?
- *Should* you throw the switch?
- **WHY?**

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But what about another case like this...

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## *another runaway trolley*

You are standing on a bridge over a railroad track railroad when you notice a runaway trolley coming down the tracks in your direction. There are five children playing on the track below too far away to hear you. There is a rather large person next to you and if you push him in front of the trolley it will stop the trolley but kill him.

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- In this case most people would say that they would *not* push the large person into the tracks, and even that it would be *wrong* to do this.
- Why is this when the results are the same in both cases?

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**Philosophical ethics** attempts to answer questions like these and figure out what ethics is all about.

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- The first branch of philosophical ethics is descriptive ethics which attempts to describe and explain how we really think about moral and ethical issues.
- Scientists also look at ethics from this perspective, for example, when neuroscientists try to determine what parts of the brain are active when we face different versions of dilemmas like the trolley problem.

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*meta-ethics*



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- Meta-ethical questions are about the *status* of ethical claims as compared with other ways of thinking and speaking, and are an important part of the philosophical approach since they concern our basic assumptions about ethics.

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- The third branch of philosophical ethics is normative or prescriptive ethics which jumps in and takes a position on the issues at hand.
- This approach is unique to philosophy since philosophical debate often involves stating a position and defending it. Philosophers are out to find the truth and trust this method of debating to help find it.



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6. **The Ethics of Care:** morality is not about abstract rules, but about real relationships

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1887-1948



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- Ruth Benedict was an American anthropologist whose encounters with indigenous peoples convinced her that there was no universally valid set of moral principles.
- For her, culture and community, not reason and humanity, dictate moral principles.
- Relativism is a "meta-ethical" claim about the nature of moral thinking and *not* an attempt to justify any particular moral principles.

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- We also disagree about the facts, but it doesn't follow from this that there are no true facts.



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- But subjectivism is nevertheless a popular theory.

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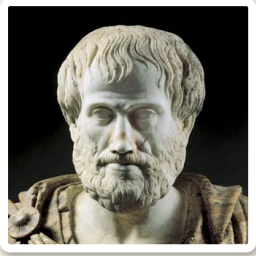
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- There are many reasons to think otherwise as we shall soon see.

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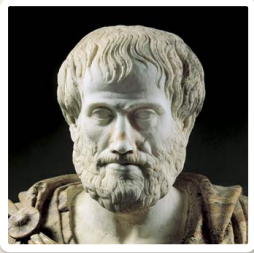
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Aristotle  
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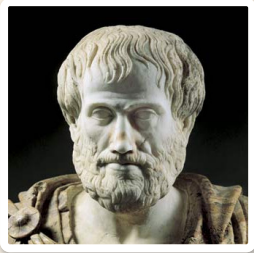
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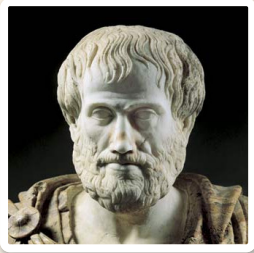


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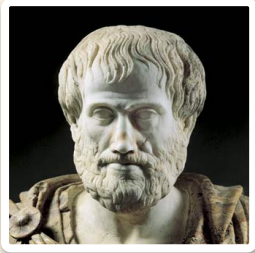
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- A good person is one who follows a middle path between extremes -- exhibiting courage and generosity and not either cowardice or fearfulness; or excessive giving or stinginess.
- Only by realizing our built-in human capacities can we truly be happy, and this is the goal of an ethical life.

# *Virtue Ethics*

## *the argument from human nature*

By nature we have certain capacities built-in to us, such as the ability to reason and participate in public life.

Its best to follow what nature dictates.

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Thus we should all try to develop our capacities to the fullest.

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- And what is "human nature" anyway?

# *Egoism*

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Max Stirner  
1806-1856

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"We owe each other nothing, for what I seem to owe you I owe at most to myself."



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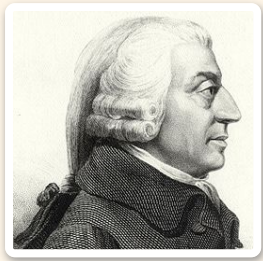
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- **Psychological egoists** claim that we can find hidden motives in *anything* anyone does, no matter how selfless it seems, but does that prove that we really can't take others into account?

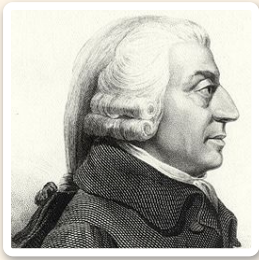
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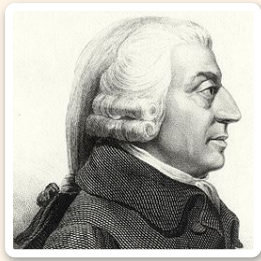
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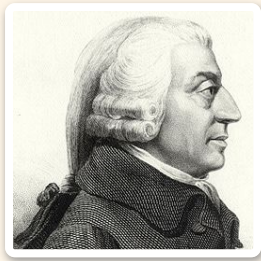


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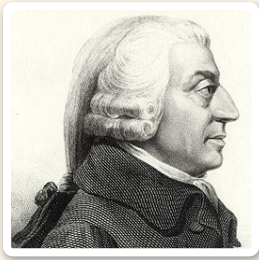


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- Adam Smith was a philosopher and economist who is often credited as the founder of capitalism.
- He claimed that free economic markets where everyone is out for their own gain lead to the best outcomes for everyone.
- **Ethical egoists** extend this claim to assert that it is *always* best to look out for ourselves and that by similar mechanisms the good of all will take care of itself.

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*an argument for psychological egoism*

Each one of us can only make decisions for ourselves.

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- But does this follow? Can't we be concerned with others even if we often have *mixed* motives, partly concerned with others and partly self-centered?

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Competition brings out the best in us -- it gives us incentives to do and be better at whatever we do.

Helping others undermines competition and destroys incentives.

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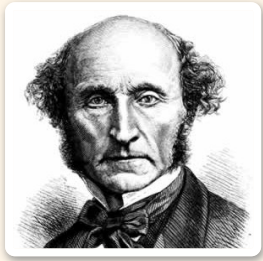
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- Competition can bring out the best in us, but it is fragile. In sports, the *worst* teams not the best get the best players in the annual draft since otherwise there would soon be no competition.
- Egoism overlooks how much a concern for others is a part of who we are.

# *Utilitarianism*

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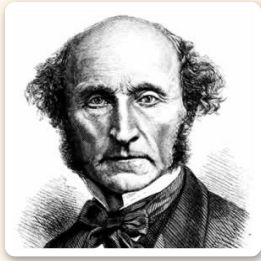


J. S. Mill  
1806-1873



# *Utilitarianism*

"Actions are right in the proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."



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# *Kant's Ethics of Duty*

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Immanuel Kant  
1724-1804

# *Kant's Ethics of Duty*

"Always treat others as ends in themselves, not merely as a means to an end."



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# *Feminist Ethics*

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Carol Gilligan  
1806-1873

# *Feminist Ethics*

"Caring requires paying attention, seeing, listening, responding with respect."



Carol Gilligan  
1806-1873

*Find out more*





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