

Philosophical Ethics

debating right and wrong
[under construction]



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

A Moral Dilemma

A Moral Dilemma

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?**

A Moral Dilemma

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But what about another case like this...

A Moral Dilemma

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* do 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.

Philosophical Ethics

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descriptive ethics

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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.

Philosophical Ethics

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meta-ethics

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Is morality really just a matter of opinion, or is it subject to rational assessment and validation?

- The second branch of philosophical ethics is meta-ethics which looks at ethics and its general features, again without taking a stance on what might really be right or wrong?
- 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.

Philosophical Ethics

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normative ethics

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normative 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

Cultural Relativism

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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.

Subjective Relativism

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John Steinbeck
1902-1968

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- Ultimately the story of "The Grapes of Wrath" shows characters banding together to overcome this idea that "sin" and "virtue" are nothing but subjective opinions.

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- Ultimately the story of "The Grapes of Wrath" shows characters banding together to overcome this idea that "sin" and "virtue" are nothing but subjective opinions.
- But subjectivism is nevertheless a popular theory.

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Moral claims are always up for debate.

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

Virtue Ethics

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Aristotle
384-322 BCE

Virtue Ethics

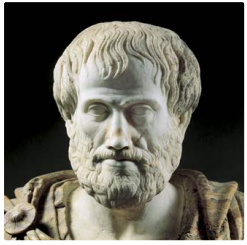
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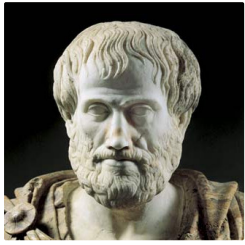


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- A good person is one who follows a middle path between extremes -- exhibiting courage and generosity and not either cowardice or fearfulness; or excessive giving or stinginess.

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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.

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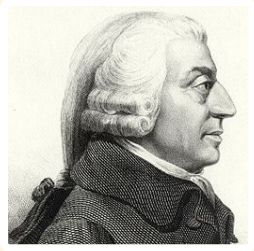
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- **Psychological egoists** claim that we can find hidden motives in *anything* anyone does, no matter how selfless it seems, but does that prove that we really can't take others into account?

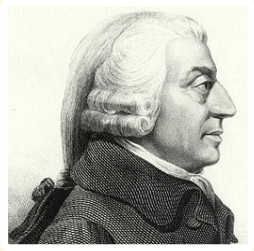
Egoism



Adam Smith
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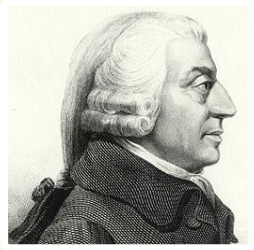
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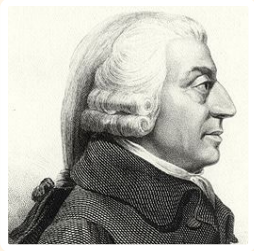


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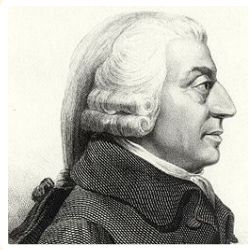


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- He claimed that free economic markets where everyone is out for their own gain lead to the best outcomes for everyone.
- **Ethical egoists** extend this claim to assert that it is *always* best to look out for ourselves and that by similar mechanisms the good of all will take care of itself.

Egoism

an argument for psychological egoism

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- This simple argument is what leads some people to declare that there just are no "selfless good deeds" to be found anywhere.
- 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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an argument for ethical egoism

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Helping others undermines competition and destroys incentives.

So we should never help others.

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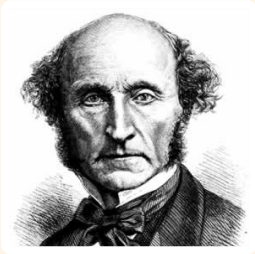
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- Competition can bring out the best in us, but it is fragile. In sports, the *worst* teams not the best get the best players in the annual draft since otherwise there would soon be no competition.
- Egoism overlooks how much a concern for others is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

Utilitarianism

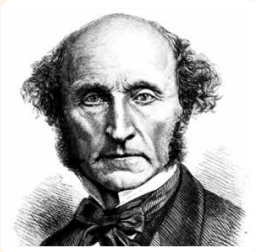
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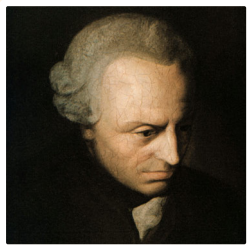
"Actions are right in the proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."



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Kant's Ethics of Duty

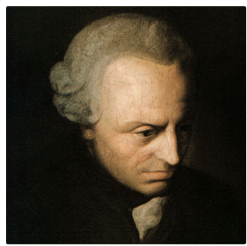
Kant's Ethics of Duty



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

Feminist Ethics



Carol Gilligan
1806-1873

Feminist Ethics

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



Carol Gilligan
1806-1873

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