

# *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*

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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* 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.

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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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*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.

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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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- 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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John Steinbeck  
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- But subjectivism is nevertheless a popular theory.

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

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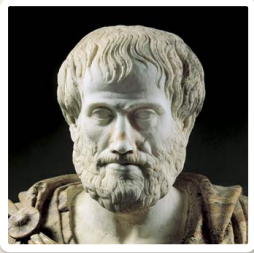
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Aristotle  
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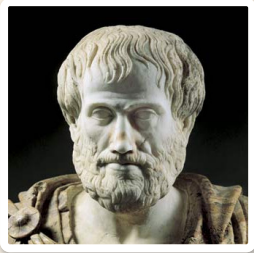
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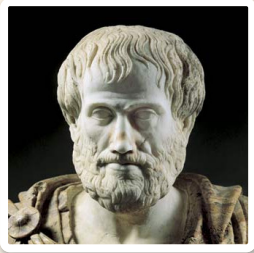


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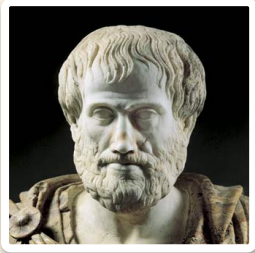
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- For Aristotle ethics and morality are not a matter of simply of knowing certain principles, but of the cultivation of character.
- A good person is one who follows a middle path between extremes -- exhibiting courage and generosity and not either 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  
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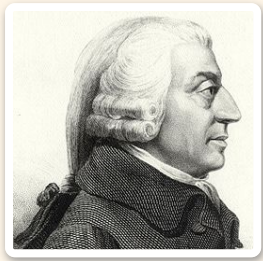
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- **Psychological egoists** claim that we can find hidden motives in *anything* anyone does, no matter how selfless it seems, but does that prove that we really can't take others into account?

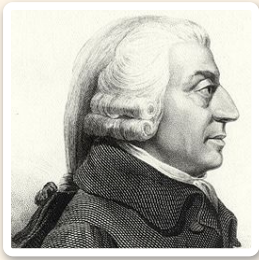
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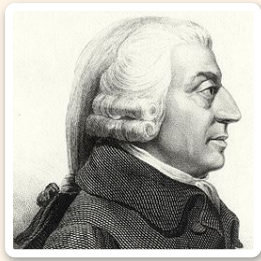
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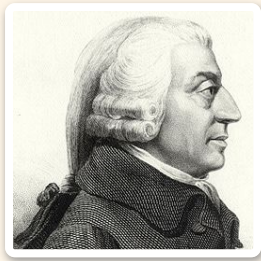


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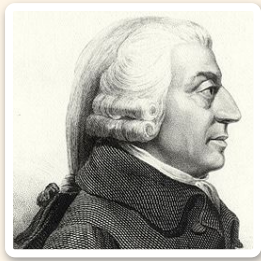


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- He claimed that free economic markets where everyone is out for their own gain lead to the best outcomes for everyone.
- **Ethical egoists** extend this claim to assert that it is *always* best to look out for ourselves and that by similar mechanisms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

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*an argument for psychological egoism*

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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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- Egoism overlooks how much a concern for others is a part of who we are.

# *Utilitarianism*

# *Kant's Ethics of Duty*



# *Feminist Ethics*

*Find out more*



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