

Philosophical Ethics

debating right and wrong



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

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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...

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.

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descriptive ethics

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- 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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meta-ethics



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- 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.

Major Moral Theories

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- **Kant's Ethics of Duties:** immoral behavior makes no ultimate sense.
- **The Ethics of Care:** morality is not about abstract rules, but about real relationships

Cultural Relativism

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Ruth Benedict
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.

Cultural Relativism

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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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- But is it really the case that our deepest moral values are nothing but opinions that might be casually discarded?

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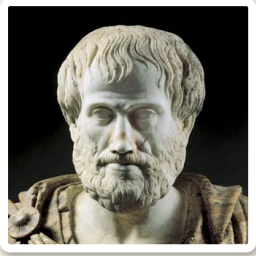
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- There are many reasons to think otherwise as we shall soon see.

Virtue Ethics

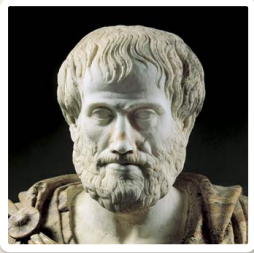
Virtue Ethics



Aristotle
384-322 BCE

Virtue Ethics

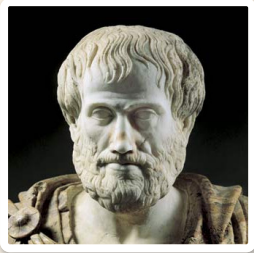
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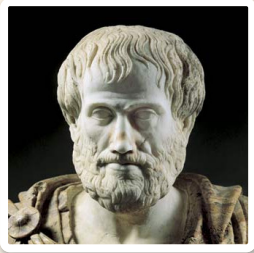


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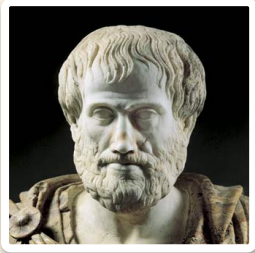


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- A good person is one who follows a middle path between extremes -- exhibiting courage and generosity and not either cowardice or fearfulness; or excessive giving or stinginess.

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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.

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

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- Aristotle recommends that we strive to "be all we can be" since that is what humans are "meant to do."
- What if I choose *not to* strive for excellence? Is that wrong?
- 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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- Max Stirner backed a view called "psychological egoism" which claims that "selfless good deeds" are impossible because we always have hidden selfish motives even when we seem to be doing things for others.
- **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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an argument for psychological egoism

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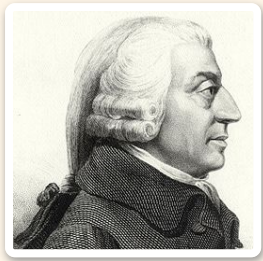
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- But does this follow? Can't we be concerned with others even if we often have *mixed* motives, partly concerned with others and partly self-centered?

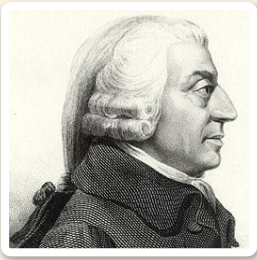
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Adam Smith
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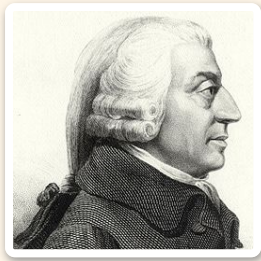
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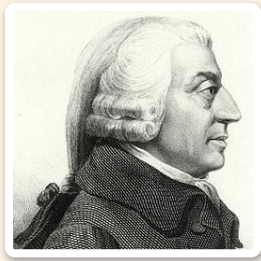


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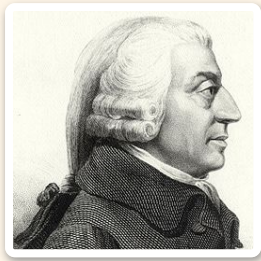


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- Adam Smith was a philosopher and economist who is often credited as the founder of capitalism.
- He claimed that free economic markets where everyone is out for their own gain lead to the best outcomes for everyone.
- **Ethical egoists** extend this 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.

Egoism

an argument for ethical egoism

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.

So we should never help others.

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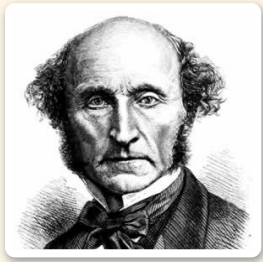
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- Competition can bring out the best in us, but it is fragile. In sports, the *worst* teams not the best get the best players in the annual draft since otherwise there would soon be no competition.
- Egoism overlooks how much a concern for others is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

Utilitarianism

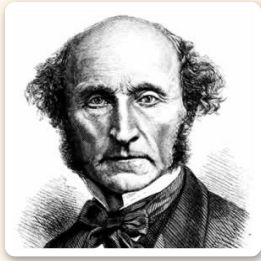
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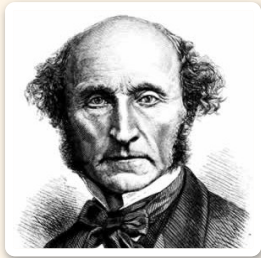
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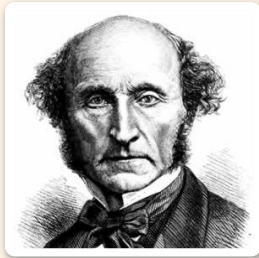


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- John Stuart Mill approaches ethical and moral questions from a practical perspective: what matters is how much good we do.
- As a pioneering economist he was also convinced that the "costs" and "benefits" of our actions and decisions could be measured, compared and anticipated.

Utilitarianism

an argument for utilitarianism

We are all after the same thing -- happiness.

Nobody's happiness counts for more than anybody else's.

Thus we should all act so as to increase the overall amount of happiness, to promote the best outcome for the most people.

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- Why should each of us accept that all of us count equally?
- One response: there is no reason to think otherwise, why should my interests matter more than yours if we are both after the same goal of being happy?

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difficulties with utilitarianism

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- How long into the future do consequences still matter?
- Can we even really predict the consequences of our actions?
- Do good outcomes *really* determine the rightness of what we do?
Anything would seem to be permissible if it led to the "greater good" of more happiness for more people.

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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- Immanuel Kant's ethics of duty asks: on what basis do we have obligations to each other?
- His answer is that obligations rest on reason alone in that anyone who thinks things through carefully will realize that all of us deserve basic respect and should never be treated as objects to be exploited or used.

Kant's Ethics of Duty

the rational basis of respect

Lying, cheating, stealing, etc. are all based on a double standard.

When I do these I expect that you won't do them back.

Rationality requires consistency, so these kinds of things are irrational to do.

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- Lying is wrong since when I lie I expect others to believe me while opting out of telling them the truth.

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- Kant's argument here is that all immoral behavior rests on an inner disharmony.
- In all cases, I assume and demand respect from others (that they should tell me the truth, respect my property, not harm me), while disrespecting others by using them as a means to my ends.

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Kant's Ethics of Duty

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- The only way to live a self-consistent life is to treat others as I expect and demand others to treat me.
- From this perspective the concepts of human rights, and our duties to each other are not based on authority, convenience or usefulness, but on simple consistency.

The Ethics of Care

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Carol Gilligan
1936-

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"Male" moral voices emphasize universal principles, while "female" moral voices emphasize concern for particular relationships.

The Ethics of Care

taking gender seriously

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So we should allow both voices to participate in discussions of morality.

- Are these different gendered perspectives "built-in" to men and women or they based on roles learned in a particular society?
- How can we balance universal concerns for human rights and equality with the demands of particular relationships based on care for individuals?

Find out more

Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics: a free textbook edited by George Matthews with essays on major approaches to philosophical ethics.

Justice: Michael Sandel of Harvard University teaches one of the most popular courses at Harvard and makes videos of his lectures available at his website.

The Crash Course: Hank Green's series contains several videos exploring various approaches to ethics.



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