Nine Moral World-Views

# Introduction, Definitions, Distinctions, Outline:

This essay sets forth basic information regarding nine ethical systems (or moral world views). The essay does not intend to provide depth. My goal here is to simply sketch some of the main tenets, starting points, bases, and key ideas of each view. Students should, at some point in their lives, take a course on ethics or educate themselves further through personal reflection, observation, and/or reading good literature on the topic. Suggested references are provided in this essay.

We begin with some definitions and distinctions. First, morality is the science of “ought.” An “ought” is a duty, often a deep-seated feeling of an obligation pressing itself upon a human being as a result of lived social, rational, and embodied experience. Somebody is in need and we feel the obligation to help them. Somebody has exerted great kindness to us and we feel obligated to respect them and to reciprocate. We observe someone harming another and we feel obligated to put a stop to the harm. We observe patterns of individual and/or collective behavior that we deem either beneficial or not beneficial to ourselves and/or others and thus seek to promote or put a stop to said specific behavior. Ought is concerned with “right and wrong,” one of the strongest and most deeply felt realities that any human being can have. Yet, it is difficult to articulate one’s reasons for how one gets from what is (observed behaviors) to what ought to be.

This essay identifies nine competing bases for one’s sense of ought. The competition here is not so much in deciding which basis is the correct one but which basis is the best starting point or the basis that should be prioritized in relation to the others. After completing the essay, students should get the sense that most human beings utilize several of these bases but often with differing emphasis. What we are seeking here is the hub of the wheel of our ethical decisions. What should be central? The nine bases are:

revelation; reason; utility; culture; biology; psychology; government; independent will; and disciplined habit.

# Presuppositions:

Before enlarging upon these bases or systems, some basic presuppositions, things that have to be assumed for morality to make sense, need to be identified. According to Immanuel Kant (1981/1785), one has to postulate the following four presuppositions in order to be rational about morality:

1: free-will; 2: innate dignity; 3: an absolute standard; 4: an ultimate judgment;

1: Obviously, without free-will a person cannot be held accountable for their actions. But the notion of free-will is highly debated. The freedom and responsibility spectrum ranges from fatalism (there is no free-will) to existentialism (all things are determined except the human person; responsibility is unavoidable). In the very middle of this spectrum one finds what is called “soft determinism,” the view that sees the deterministic elements of nature compatible with human decision. Somehow, for human beings, there appears to be a at least a minimum “gap” between stimulus and response. Our responses to stimuli are (or can be) delayed, even if

for a split second, so that we can “choose” our response. There are also positions on either side of soft determinism moving either toward fatalism or toward existentialism. (Cf. Hunnex, 1986).

2: Obviously, if a being does not possess innate dignity, how can one attribute value or morality to their actions? This would apply to actions done by someone and to someone. Innate dignity becomes the first assumption one makes as to why it is wrong to harm oneself or another. It is wrong because it injures the innate dignity possessed by the person.

3: An absolute standard, Kant reasons, is necessary for there to be clarity rather than confusion about what is right and what is wrong. Kant would agree that, in some cases, one runs into moral ambiguity, but the foundation of morality must be certain. This certainty Kant expressed in his formulation of the categorical imperative (more on this later).

4: If the wicked prosper in this life and the good suffer, which is often the case, Kant proposed that there must be an ultimate judgment where this imbalance is corrected.

For Kant, and other theorists, each of these four presuppositions rest upon the practical necessity of there being a God, one who designed human life for freedom, endows human beings with an innate dignity, provides sufficient reason to deduce the categorical imperative, and functions as the just judge.

Criteria:  
Thomas Aquinas (cf. the translation offered by Brady, 2004) is known for establishing

criteria for moral action. Four criteria are identified:  
1: intrinsic value; 2: positive intention; 3: appropriate means; 4: desired result;

1: Aquinas reasoned that for an action to be a moral action it had to be good in itself rather than an action undertaken in order to accomplish something else. For example, giving to charity is usually considered a moral action. One should give because they care and desire to meet another’s need. One should give simply because it is the right thing to do. If one gives in order to receive recognition and reward from this recognition, then the action ceases to retain its moral value;

2: The second criteria, positive intention, seems related to the first. The intention behind the action is deemed just as important as the action itself. This is sometimes referred to as the “internal pole” of moral action.

3: The third criteria, appropriate means, suggests that it matters how the moral action occurs. For example, if one uses stolen funds to meet a charitable need, the morality of the action is nullified.

4: The fourth criteria, desired result, focuses upon the “external pole,” of the action. It asks the question: Did the desired result occur? If one gives to charity but the proceeds never get to the ones that need it in such a way that their need is truly met, the action loses its moral value.

# Mitigating Factors:

In a court of law, one’s actions are often mitigated for anyone of five considerations: 1: ignorance; 2: passion; 3: fear; 4: coercion; 5: habituation;

1: You have probably heard the phrase “ignorance of the law is no excuse.” Yet, in a court of law, if you can demonstrate that you had no intention of violating said law, a judge might mitigate your penalty;

2: Legal proceedings often focus upon whether an action was premeditated or done “in the heat of a passion.” Again, one’s sentence might be mitigated as the former action is considered more heinous than the latter;

3: If one commits a crime because they were afraid that if they did not act thus that they might be severely hurt, then, again, a penalty might be mitigated.

4: Clearly, if one is coerced into an action, threatened somehow, then their action is not as severe if they had committed it with full intent of harm.

5: Although people should take responsibility for getting themselves addicted, judges often mitigate a sentence if they can determine that the person was acting with a paralyzed will, a will that had been bound by some kind of addiction.

One thing to keep in mind with all of these mitigations is that they bring little comfort to the person or persons who may have been victimized by a criminal action. Mitigations are simply a legal way of recognizing that those who commit crimes still have innate dignity and deserve fair consideration under the law. One size does not fit all in the justice system.

## 1: The Divine Command Model: Revelation the basis:

This theory argues that what is right and/or wrong results from that which is accord with the will of God. God’s will is supreme. God’s will is expressed through revelations. In Judaism the Torah is primary. It Christianity the Gospel of Jesus is primary. It Islam the Koran is primary. This model affirms God’s initiative in giving revelation. Revelation is complimented by reason, also considered a gift from God to human beings. In most religions, tradition supplements the sacred text’s witness to a primary revelation. Different branches of a given religion will differ on the nature of and authority of scripture and tradition, thus creating tension and debate within this model. Kenney’s Canvas essay on Models of Revelation can be consulted here for more specifics. My essay is largely informed by Dulles (1983).

## 2: Kantian Ethics: Reason is the basis:

This theory is based on Kant (1785). It assumes that human beings have innate dignity. This dignity can be seen to be derived either from one’s capacity to reason and/or from one’s status as a “child of God,” in “God’s image.” Hence, human beings have a reciprocal duty to respect one another and to treat each other with kindness. Our duty, our ought can be expressed philosophically in what Kant called the categorical imperative: Only act on that axiom of action that you could deem a principle of action for all others to act on if similarly situated. This is the philosopher’s golden rule (do unto others). If everyone spoke truth, deceit would be gone. If everyone respected each other’s private property, well, we wouldn’t have to lock up our bicycles when we go to the store, etc. We wouldn’t have to worry about locking our doors. These examples could be multiplied. Hence, never do unto another that which you wouldn’t want another to do to you. It is clearly a rational principle. It is self-evident. If everyone behaved this way, we would have an ideal society. If everyone ignored this principle, we would have chaos. For Kant, “the only thing good in and of itself is a good will” (cf. Kant, p. 7). This system very much emphasized the internal pole of the moral imperative. One might critique this system as being based on sort of a cold logic. Behavior dictated by reason alone. This is why Kant encouraged religion as a supplement to his rational system. He defined religion as “ the recognition of all duties as divine commands, morality touched by emotion.” In this sense, models 1 and 2 work together quite nicely.

## 3: Utilitarianism: the utility of action as the basis:

This view came into prominence in the modern world through the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (1861). Their view appears to be an updating the ancient worldview referred to as hedonism. In this view the aim of all action is pleasure, admitting that there are various levels and types of pleasure (physical; social; spiritual). Hence, an action is to be considered moral if it achieves the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people. This utility can be calculated. Seven criteria are often appealed to. These are: intensity, duration, certainty, nearness, fruitfulness, purity, and extent. In deciding upon the morality of an action the person (or the group) needs to consider all of these criteria, weighing and balancing the foreseen effect of an action. Obviously, in this system, an action can only be deemed moral in hindsight. In other words, when one looks back upon one’s actions can one conclude that, overall, the net effect of the action benefited the greatest number of people in the greatest manner. Again, obviously, actions then can be graded on this scale. This system differs from Kantian in that Utilitarianism shifts the emphasis to the external pole of the moral action.

## 4: Moral Relativism: Cultural sentiment is the basis:

This view has many advocates. Perhaps David Hume (1751) can be seen as its chief representative. Hume is the classic skeptic. He was not confident that a rational basis could be established upon which one could decide absolutely between right and wrong. However, any observer, any empiricist, will note that making judgments between right and wrong is commonplace. It is not so much are thinking but our feeling that dictates our decisions. And, one’s feelings are largely shaped by one’s culture and upbringing. Hence, cultural sentiment becomes the measure of morality even though one has to admit that culture sentiments vary from culture to culture. Hence, morality is relative to the culture. Hume’s views set the stage for debates about moral relativism versus moral absolutism. The first three models appear to exercise greater confidence in reasoning about what is moral than does this fourth model. The following set of contrasts may aid in thinking through the disparities between model four and the previous three models:

## Moral Relativism:

norms vary among cultures human nature is evolving an absolute norm eludes us morality is opinion

morality is a preference

Moral Absolutism

norms are more fixed among cultures human nature is fixed  
an absolute norm can be discovered morality represents true knowledge morality has a factual basis

## 5: Sociobiology: Biology is the basis:

This perspective has been advanced by E. O. Wilson (1975), the founder of a new synthesis in academia, a synthesis that is now referred to as sociobiology. The main thesis of this model is that our morality has a biological basis. Like speech, morality is rooted in a biologically evolved ability. In a vein similar to model four (moral relativism) this model recognizes the differing expressions of morality to be a result of cultural evolution. But biological evolution (genes) and cultural evolution (memes) work hand in hand. This theory identifies three adaptive traits that eventually gave rise to our modern sense of morality. These are: (1): the ability to anticipate consequences; (2): the ability to make value judgments; and (3): the ability to choose between alternatives. Supporting these evolved traits is the survival mechanisms of attachment and affiliation. Mothers attach to their infants and vice versa. Fathers sense the affiliation to mother and child as do siblings, aunts, uncles, etc. Hence, altruism, care for others viewed as valuable, evolved as a basic and natural disposition of the human animal. Kinship and fitness maximization thus contribute as forces in our moral thinking. Scientists today have coined the phrase “mirror neurons” to explain why it is that we feel sympathy for one another. Our brains are equipped to “mirror” another’s pains and joys thus creating a biological basis for our moral actions to one another.

## 6: Psychology: Psychological development is the basis:

This theory of moral development has been championed by several researches, perhaps Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) is a good representative. This theory argues that morality is developmental from childhood through adulthood. Stages can be discerned. Among these are:

(1): fear or deference to authority in order to avoid punishment;  
(2): reward or deference to authority in order to gain what one wants;  
(3): approval or conformity to authority in order to gain acceptance;  
(4): commitment to duty based on conscience or legal reasoning;  
(5): commitment to one’s own person to gain self-respect;  
(6): commitment to a sense of unity with some kind of absolute moral principle;

One should be able to see a path to maturity in moral motivations from stages one through six. It is surprising, upon reflection, how much of one’s behavior appears motivated by stages 1 and 2.

## 7: Social Contract Theory: Government is the basis:

This perspective on morality lays great stress upon the social contract that individuals enter into with the governing body in a society. Hence, the phrase “social contract.” Morality, then, seems to be equated with the conventions in a given society; somewhat akin to model four, moral relativism. People agree to live together and consent to laws of the land out of a need for the protections that an organized society offers. In this system, the common good is paramount, along with self-preservation and the maximization of individual freedoms insofar as they do not conflict with the common good. The writings of John Locke (1689) might be a good resource for this view. The tension in critical thinking in this view is that between law and morality. Should one consider what is legal as equivalent to what is moral?

## 8: Individualistic Existentialism: Independent will is the basis:

This theory is championed by existentialists who prize individual will and liberty above all other things. The greatest ought that any of us has is to be true to ourselves, to be authentic. What is good and what is evil varies among existentialist thinkers. A representative of this approach is Frederich Nietzsche (1886). One might read his “Beyond Good and Evil” to see how his approach differs from and critiques the previous approaches we have looked at.

## 9: Character Ethics: the habit of choosing the mean between extremes is the basis:

This theory was championed by Aristotle (350 BCE) in his Nichomachean ethics. Aristotle was quite practical. He wanted to shift the focus from individual actions to the evolving character of a person. It’s not what one does that matters as much as who one is becoming. Hence, he defined virtue as “choosing the mean between extremes.” He called this “the golden mean.” Over time, if a person disciplined themselves to avoid both excess and deficiency, they would develop a virtuous character. This habit then leads to good people who, out of habit, having chosen the right thing to say or do, become the right kind of persons, those who act the right way, at the right time, in the right situation, with the right motives. The four cardinal philosophic virtues illustrate this approach:

(1): Courage is the mean between cowardice and reckless foolhardiness; (2): Temperance is the mean between asceticism and indulgence;  
(3): Prudence is the mean between rash judgment and delayed judgment; (4): Justice is the mean between leniency and severity;

## Conclusion and Class Discussion:

We have sketched nine theories of morality, identifying key ideas in each theory. Each theory has a differing basis and differing perspectives. All of them have their appeal and there are things about which one can find legitimate criticism for each theory. This brief survey of the nine theories of morality should stimulate further discussion. Here are a few discussion questions:

Q1: How would you rank these theories? Identify your top 3 theories, the one’s you think are more helpful in shedding light on what is right versus what is wrong than the others. Identify, if you can that theory that you would rank as #1. State your reasons.

Q2: After discussing Q1 in small groups, have someone tabulate the results. What kind of agreement did you have? What theories scored the most points? What theory came out on top?

Q3: Obviously, moral decision making might differ in nature from one situation to another. Think of a case study in which it makes sense to value one theory over another? Attempt to explain why. Whatever case study you select or invent, be sure to connect your position on the matter to one of these nine theories. Also, be sure to demonstrate awareness of both sides of the argument. The class exercise here is not for “airing one’s view” or “blowing off steam.” The purpose here is critical thinking and civil discussion of controversial issues.

Example case study: I select abortion primarily because it is, arguably, the most

controversial moral issue of our times. The issue has not gone away since 1972 Roe vs Wade and seems to be a litmus test in dividing politicians and parties. My presentation here does not intend to take a side on the issue. My purpose is to illustrate the importance of selecting a moral theory and to follow its rationale. Please understand that I am not attempting to be exhaustive nor am I intending to solve this moral issue in this class exercise.

a: the issue of abortion.  
The two sides of this debate are generally presented as pro-life and pro-choice. But both

sides immediately throw rocks at the other with regard to their label. The pro-lifers often label the opposing position as “pro-murder.” The pro-choicers often point out that the pro-lifer’s have a very narrow view of life as they often are pro-capital punishment, pro-war, pro-torture, and/or pro-poverty. This “rock throwing” does not advance the discussion very well as it avoids any meaningful dialogue. Both sides might agree that working together for “ prevention of unwanted pregnancies” could constitute common ground. The tension in this debate is over the rights of a fetus to continue on to brith versus the rights of a women to choose to not allow that to happen. If the status of the fetus as a person can be substantiated, then, the pro-life position would seem to have the support of revelation (thou shall not kill), reason (don’t do to others what you would not want done to yourself), utilitarianism (the greatest good for the greatest number—erring here on the side of assuming that the fetus brought to full term would have the potential for blessing a lot of people), culture (perhaps putting an end to abortion would raise consciousness about the value of newborns), biology (emphasizing pro-life connects vitally with a mother’s “mirror neurons”), and psychology (acting out of the last stage of moral development, namely, a universal principle of reverence for life).

If the status of the fetus as a person cannot be substantiated, then the pro-choice position would seem to have the support of revelation (there are some religions that do not award the status of the fetus the same level of value as a born person), reason (one here would argue that given the non-person status of a fetus, the woman’s option of choice and control over her reproductive concerns is her prerogative), utility (women who choose an abortion often do so because they envision future harm to more people than not, including possible harm to the, to be born, child), culture (perhaps allowing a women’s choice further empowers women), biology (an unwanted pregnancy may not allow for normal biological bonding), psychology (a woman’s right to choose could be viewed as a mature universal principle), government (currently, USA government allows abortion as a legal option), and independent will (clearly, the pro-choice position affirms this more than the pro-life position as the pro-life position subordinates a person’s will to an external authority).

Clearly, the issue hinges upon the “if” that introduces the preceding two paragraphs. The matter appears to be one that can only be decided by philosophy and/or theology. In a secular society, in the USA, where we have agreed to separate church and state but still allow the free exercise of religious views and freedom of speech, one should understand that this problem probably won’t go away soon. The matter should continue to be debated. Perhaps, in the mean time, we should all work together to reduce unwanted pregnancies. In addition, since the task of defining “personhood” is not an easy matter for the born much less the unborn (cf. Stephens, 2006), more research and debate need to be undertaken.

Other possible case studies:  
b: the issue of capital punishment;  
c: the issue of assisted suicide;  
d: the issue of torture;  
e: the issue of non-combatants in military situations; think here of drone strikes

where collateral damage might occur or when family members of terrorist leaders are targeted as well;

f: the issue of same-sex marriage;

g: the issue of equal pay for equal work regardless of gender or other potentially discriminating factors;

h: the issue of a just wage versus a minimum wage;

i: the issue of economic justice at large; current USA culture provides police protection, fire protection, and K-12 public education at the tax payer’s expense. How many other services should this be extended to? Why or why not? Is health care one of them? Why or why not?

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