

Ethos
A General Theory of Ethics

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Introduction

(W.I.P.) The ethical question is perhaps the most debated and unquestionably the most formidable challenge known to humankind. Across centuries, civilizations have wrestled with questions of morality, justice, and meaning, yet consensus remains elusive. Humanity is left both divided and perpetually dissatisfied, a condition that has persisted despite countless attempts at resolution. To confront this dissatisfaction—if not to quell it entirely—stands as one of the most profound and consequential pursuits imaginable. The gravity of such an undertaking cannot be overstated; it is a task that has humbled philosophers, theologians, and logicians across time. Even if the endeavor were to end in aporia, the pursuit itself is by any definition meaningful.

Free Will

Philosophers are met with a terrifying adversary early on in the quest for ethical enlightenment. All meaningful definitions of ethics are destroyed if the agent in question is absolutely determined. In other words, if all my actions are entirely the result of environmental causes and not of Me, the thinking being, then intention and action are as meaningless as the cause. To address this challenge, it will be insightful to imagine what a being with free will, we'll call this a "free agent", might look like if such a thing *could* exist. What would be going on at a physical level that would constitute a free agent? This would be, put simply, an unmoved mover. This being would need to be capable of acting on the world independent of the world. In other words, something from the metaphysical "outside" reaching in.

The important point here is that there is only one way to falsify the existence of such a being: one would have to demonstrate that all of an agent's actions can be determined given the full set of initial conditions. Take an electron, for example. It may feel strange to claim that an electron has free will, but what determines the way an electron acts upon our world? Until we're able to completely determine the cause of all effects, "random" is indistinguishable from "free", and human beings are no exception.

From here, we can lean on a version of Pascal's Wager to give us our first ethical axiom and carry us safely to the next stage of this intellectual journey. In lieu of a proof that you, the cogito, are a completely determined being, you are morally obligated to pursue moral knowledge. The same argument can be applied when considering a proof that no objective moral framework exists, but more on that later.

Ought

Those with a grip on at least the broad strokes of a genuine philosophical investigation, which if you've made it this far I assume you possess, will understand that the direction of a conversation on ethics is entirely determined by the definition of the terms. In this light, I'll posit the following definition: ethics are the set of principles an individual refers to when determining a course of action in a given scenario. This definition is 'good enough' insofar as it will allow us to move away from the Socratic method of definition in favor of Wittgenstein's definition by usage.

The word 'ought' is used to describe a requirement to accomplish some predefined task in an "if-then" or "in order to" pattern. For example, if you don't want to be late for school, then you ought to wake up early. Note that in this example, the 'ought' is absolutely determined by the 'is'. Specifically, most are made aware of the truth of the aforementioned statement by some combination of experience and the word of a trusted authority. In more divine contexts, the former portion is often omitted for convenience. The theory of morals in popular religions begin implicitly with "in order to do right by God...", "in order to go to Heaven...", "in order to achieve Nirvana...", etc. The prerequisite to an ethical statement, therefore, is a specific desired state of being. In the case of a 'capital E Ethical' statement, the desired state is a state of afterlife. This is a description of what Kant calls a hypothetical imperative.

Note that this position is independent of David Hume's idea of 'ought'. Hume suggests that what ought to be cannot be determined by what is. This introduces a new usage of the word which deviates from the definition above. This new usage needs to be addressed separately, and ultimately stands apart from the ethical question entirely. To wonder about what *ought to be* is a question for politicians, anthropologists, physicians, and perhaps psychologists. To wonder about what *I ought to do* is the ethical question.

From here, we come to a pragmatic and rather humbling stage in the pursuit of ethical knowledge. **Each and every individual must seek to find evidence for an afterlife that would indicate a way of acting so as to pursue a desired outcome if one exists.** While it may seem otherwise, this is not a claim based on any religious principle. The concept of moral maxim necessitates the existence of a desired outcome after death. All talk of ethics otherwise is as Kant describes, a *wretched anthropology*, including Kant's own Categorical Imperative.

Conclusion: The Sea of Ethos

Imagine a man wakes on a boat in a vast ocean. On all horizons and as far as the eye can see, there is nothing except swirling water and seething foam. The man finds himself in good company, as there are many other boats like his. Many have formed coalitions, planking their boats together to form ships, some so huge that they're able to house entire communities with lawmakers and police for governance. The recently awakened man paddles to the nearest conglomeration to inquire about this strange circumstance. The ship he paddles to is adrift, but there are others in the distance, chugging slowly along in different directions.

"Where are those ships going" he asks a passerby, "and why isn't this ship moving at all?"

A glance, a pause, and then a reply: "Well, they think there's something out there to find."

As it was explained, there are some who believe in a less fluid body than the one everyone finds themselves afloat on. Something stable, something solid. And while no one has ever seen such a thing, there are those that believe that the tides and currents of the ocean are an indication of such a space.

This analogy is a near-perfect reflection of the contemporary ethical landscape. Ethics is our stranded man's pursuit of knowledge about the question of the existence of land. Each ship represents a different belief about the existence of land at all, as well as the method for deriving a heading. The knowledge about land is totally distinct from the rules and regulations that govern a ship's community. This is the difference between how most see ethics and what Ethics really are.