

Biology and Society

Unit Three: Ethics

Branches of Philosophy Relevant to Science

Epistemology—the systematic investigation of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge. It attempts to answer the question, how does the human mind perceive and know what is outside itself?

Ontology—is concerned with the nature and relations of being. For us it asks the question of who and what we are.

Ethics—the branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness or wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness or badness of the motives and ends of such actions.

What are the relationships between science and philosophy?

Epistemology → Science

Science is dependent on epistemology to define and understand the epistemic values of science.

Ontology ← Science

Ontology is dependent on science for reliable knowledge of who and what we are.

Ethics ← Ontology ← Science

In turn, ontology informs ethics by establishing our identity which determines what we consider of importance and therefore our values.

Ethics → Science

Ethics defines and informs professional science of the ethical issues and obligations that arise from scientific research.

The Division of Ethics

The **primary division of ethics** is into:

- A) the study of the ethical relationships between moral entities
- B) the study of the sources of motivation for ethical behavior

Ethical relationships can be further subdivided into:

- 1) the ethical relationships within a self identified group
- 2) the ethical relationships between autonomous groups
- 3) the ethical relationships between humans and other life-forms

The **sources of motivation** for ethical behavior fall into only two categories:

- 1) "ethical" behavior motivated by innate "moral sentiments" or intuition
- 2) ethical behavior motivated by rational thought

Rational motivations can be further divided into:

- a) those guided by absolute categorical imperatives
- b) those guided by provisional ultimate goals

Absolute Principles or Outcomes

Traditional Ethical Theories

Moral Legalism: The moral rightness of acts is determined solely by rules, principles, or commandments. Examples of moral legalism are:

1. Ethical egoism: One ought always to maximize one's personal good
2. Divine command theory: Whatever God commands is right.
3. Natural Law Ethics: One ought always to act in accordance with nature.
4. Kantianism: One ought always to act on maxims that can be universal.
5. Utilitarianism: One ought always to maximize the general good.
6. Principle of justice: One ought always to act justly.

Moral Particularism: The rightness of acts depends solely on the situations in which they are performed and is not derived from rules, principles, or commandments.

(modified from Holmes, 1998)

Consequentialist opposed to Non-Consequentialist Ethics

Moral Legalism can be either consequentialist or non-consequentialist in perspective.

Utilitarianism is based on the legalistic principle that one ought always to maximize the general good. But it is consequentialist in that it is the outcome that counts.

Divine command theory, in contrast, gives absolute moral rules that must be obeyed without regard to consequences.

Moral Particularism is predominately consequentialist but may be guided by moral principles as in utilitarianism. It is important, however, to recognize that, in moral particularism, moral principles are secondary to outcomes.

(modified from Holmes, 1998)

The Sectarian Flaw of Absolute Moral Rules

All absolute moral rules suffer from a key logical flaw. All of them are defined by a particular sect, usually religious. Therefore, by definition they are sectarian in the sense of rigidly adhering to a particular set of doctrines and intolerant of other views.

"There are many religions in the world, with several of them (including almost all branches of Christianity and of Islam) claiming to be valid for all people at all times. Each has numerous adherents of the highest integrity and intelligence. These faiths contradict each other, and so at most only one of them can be right. Accordingly a huge number of believers must be wrong."
—Hermann Bondi, 1993

The problem for public ethics in a pluralistic society is which set of sectarian absolute moral rules could we use without alienating the rest of society.

What is ethical behavior?

A Consequentialist's Definition

Ethical behavior is social behavior that is modified by rational considerations in the present *to achieve shared goals in the future*. Ethical behavior is rational, mutually end-directed social behavior.

Who are the ethical players?

Moral Subjects) Those beings to whom moral agents have moral obligations are moral subjects. For the purpose of this course, all living humans are considered moral subjects. This leaves out, for the moment, whether other life-forms should be considered moral subjects.

Moral Agents) Moral agents are those living beings that, because they have the capacity for rational thought, are independently able to identify and discharge moral obligations to moral subjects. Therefore, until we discover rational life-forms other than human beings, only human beings can be moral agents.

Moral Followers) Moral followers are those human beings that are unable to independently identify moral obligations toward moral subjects, but are able to control their own behavior to the extent they are able to follow moral rules established by moral agents.



Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 -1900)

"What alone can *our* teaching be?—That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*. No one is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives. The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from the fatality of all that which has been and will be."

From *Twilight of the Idols* (1888)

Nietzsche's Dictum

Because no living entity had control over their conception and birth, no living entity is morally responsible for their existence nor for how they are genetically constituted.

Nietzsche's Dictum is the rational explanation why all living humans, as moral subjects, should be treated as equally valuable by all moral agents. Aristotle, however, pointed out that, although all moral subjects are equally valuable, they should not be treated equally. They should be treated, rather, according to their needs.

Moral Agents as Rational, Autonomous Thinkers

To be a moral agent you must be aware of the causal relationship between behavior and goals. As moral behavior is purposeful, end-directed behavior, a moral agent must understand the end toward which their behavior is modified to achieve. This awareness is a knowledge based, rational state of consciousness. A new-born child has no knowledge of the world and cannot, therefore, be a moral agent. An individual who is insane is incapable of rational thought and, equally, can not be a moral agent. Both the new-born and the insane are moral subjects by virtue of their being alive, but they are incapable of identifying and discharging moral obligations to other moral subjects. Moral agents must be able to identify those moral subjects toward whom they have obligations and the obligations they have toward them. This requires rational, autonomous thought.

The Limitations of Moral Followers

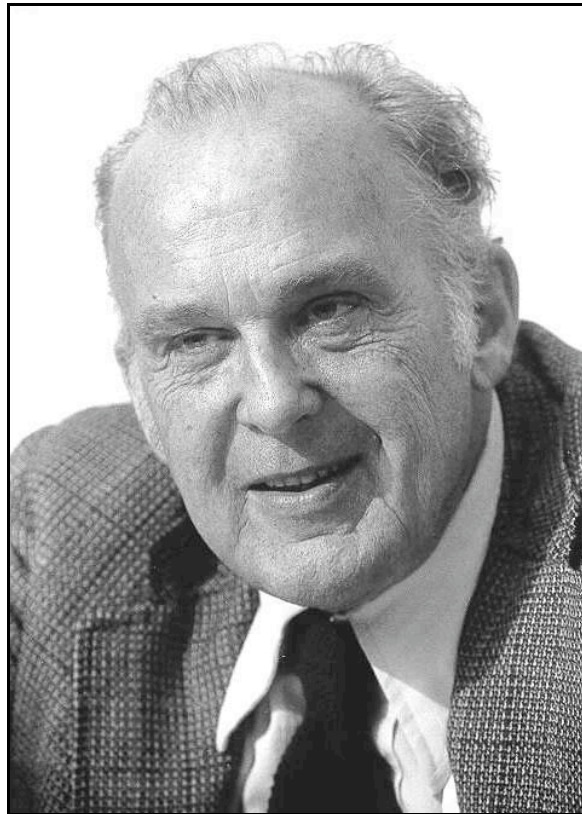
The last category of moral entity, that of moral followers, represents the juvenile state of moral behavior. It is that category of individuals who are able to control their behavior to the extent that they can follow a proscribed set of rules given to them by moral agents. The crucial difference is that moral followers, as opposed to moral agents, are unable to make moral decisions about novel moral problems not covered by the code of behavior in which they have been indoctrinated. Being a moral agent requires an individual to be rationally self-autonomous. Being a moral follower requires only that individuals be indoctrinated into a moral code of behavior during their primary socialization. Young children go through this process and are expected to be able to control their behavior morally sometime after early childhood. In our society it is accepted that this indoctrination process should be complete by the age of eighteen. However, far too few eighteen-year-olds, as well as adults, have sufficient knowledge of our world and are sufficiently rational, self-autonomous thinkers to be moral agents. Most adults, most of their lives, are able only to be moral followers, and many are incapable of even this.

Public Ethics in a Pluralistic Society

Which system of ethical thought can we use in a pluralistic society?

Mediational Ethics

(a.k.a. Provisional or Consensual ethics)



Donald T. Campbell (1917-1996)

“A mediational normative ethics uses knowledge about the world and man to recommend optimal human behavior for the implementation of assumed ultimate goals.” (Campbell 1979)

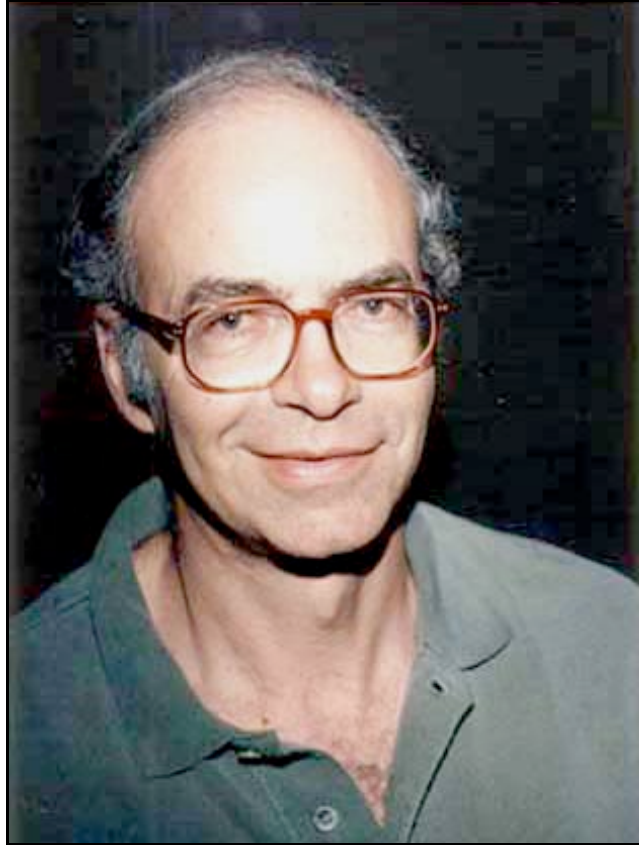
What ethical principles can we agree to use in a system of moral particularism such as mediational ethics?

Reciprocity

“the principle of equal consideration of the interests of all.”
(Singer 1981)

Ethical cooperation between *rational like-kinds* can be based on the logical assumption that the desires an individual has are the same as others like themselves. Reciprocity subsumes the concepts equity, fairness, and justice.

Reciprocity recognizes that all members of a society should have an equal share in the benefits and obligations of their society. The lesson from history is that when a society marginalizes part of its citizens, it dooms itself to failure. Justice, equity, and fairness are not disembodied concepts. They are the principles, discovered in our dark past through trial and error, that sustain a society through time.



Peter Singer (1946 -)

Singer was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1946, and educated at the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford. Since 1999, he has been Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University. He is considered by many to be the most influential ethical philosopher of our times.

Assumed Ultimate Goals

“For ethics, we have to make an *unproven choice* of values. I suggest *human survival under humane conditions*: We don't want humans under r-selected conditions (as many offspring as possible, most of them dying, earlier and earlier pregnancies, etc.).” (Donald T. Campbell in Callebaut 1993).

The moral prescription of **sustainability** is derived from the imperative of biological continuity. If we wish to maintain biological continuity, our behaviors must be indefinitely sustainable. But this is not enough. We must define what type of world we wish to sustain.

What must be added to sustainability is the concept of **optimization**. It is not enough for the human mind to maintain biological continuity without addressing the quality of human life. Ethical behavior is shared, end directed behavior. Thus the end toward which our behavior is directed is defined by what we collectively wish for the future. But defining this **desired future** must be done as a part of defining ourselves. And the fundamental observation, that is crucial, is that each of us at birth has an inherent constructive potential. Without regard to specific outcomes, it is enough for us to set as our goal that every individual be helped to achieve this potential. Every child born should be given the chance to live an optimal life.

For more on biological continuity, sustainability, and optimization go to:
<http://fire.biol.wvu.edu/trent/alles/EthicalNaturalism.pdf>

Optimization & Reproduction

Condorcet's Obligation—“Men will know then that, if they have obligations towards beings who are yet to come into the world, they do not consist in giving to them existence only, but happiness as well.”

from *Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* by Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet (1795)

The ethical concept of **optimization** is the moral goal, expressed in Condorcet's obligation, of providing the best chance for every child to live an **optimal life history**. We may fail because of unforeseen events, but we must try to make our world better for future generations.

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