

ETHICS: PRELIMINARY VIEWS

Life's just filled with all sorts of things you're supposed to do. You should be nice to your sister, brush between meals, never mix beer and wine, get your car inspected, tithe to the poor, wear clean underwear, avoid consumer debt, love thy neighbor as thyself, buy low and sell high, read good books, exercise, tell the truth, have evidence-based beliefs, come to a complete stop at a red light, eat your vegetables, call your Dad once in a while. The list goes on and on. All these things you should do, various obligations, duties, and responsibilities, form the *normative universe*. Shoulds, oughts, duties, rights, the permissible and the impermissible populate the normative universe. Not all these shoulds and oughts are ethical in nature, however. There are many dimensions to the normative universe, not just the moral dimension. Here are a few examples: 1.1

- Jeff is deciding whether he should invest his money in gold bullion, mutual funds, or government bonds.
- Jennifer wonders whether it is permissible for her to turn right on red in this state.
- Kevin is debating whether he ought to put more cinnamon in his ginger snaps.
- Holly is considering whether her crossword answer is right.

The first case is about what Jeff should *practically or prudentially* invest in; the second example concerns the *legal* permissibility of turning right on red; the third offers an *aesthetic* case regarding what Kevin ought to do 1.2

2 Ethics: Preliminary Views

when baking cookies; and the fourth case is about the *accuracy* of Holly's believing that her crossword answer is correct. In these cases, "should," "permissible," "ought," and "right" have nothing to do with morality, even though they are still normative expressions. When exactly those words concern morality is not an easy matter to describe with any precision. Nevertheless, confusion will ensue if we aren't sensitive to the fact that what we ought to do practically or legally is not the same as what we ought to do morally. We will see more of this later.

1.3 Everyone is faced with making ethical choices—decisions about what they should do in some circumstance. We must each decide for ourselves whether a potential action is right or wrong, and contemplate the nature of honor, duty, and virtue. There are standards of correct action that aren't moral standards. Still, it is clear that the following are cases of moral deliberation.

- Your best friend's girlfriend is coming on to you at the party. If you can get away with it, should you hook up with her?
- Your friend Shawna knows how to pirate new-release movies, and wants to show you how. Should you go with her and get some flicks?
- Your grandmother is dying of terminal pancreatic cancer and has only a few, painful, days to live. She is begging you to give her a lethal overdose of morphine, which will depress her respiration and allow her to die peacefully. Should you give her the overdose?
- You are a pregnant, unmarried student. Testing has shown that your fetus has Down Syndrome. Should you abort?
- You didn't study enough for your chem exam, and don't have all those formulas you need memorized. One of your friends tells you to program your smartwatch with the formulas you need. Your prof will just think you are looking at the time and never catch you cheating. You should do whatever you can to get ahead in this world, right?

1.4 These aren't far-fetched cases; at least a few of them should fit your own experience. Well, how do you decide what to do? If you're like most people, you might reflect on whatever values your parents taught you growing up; or think about what your religion or holy book has to say on the topic; or go with your gut instinct about what to do; or consider the consequences if you do the action; or imagine how it would make you feel later if you did it; or think about whether the proposed action is compatible with some moral rule you believe, like do unto others as they would do unto you. If you look at this list, you'll see that it naturally divides into two main

approaches: (1) base your action on some rule, principle, or code, and (2) base your action on some intuition, feeling, or instinct.

1.1 Is Morality Just Acting on Principles?

You might think that moral action means sticking to your principles, holding fast to your beliefs and respecting how you were raised. Or perhaps morality is acting as you think God intends, by strictly following your holy book. Acting on the basis of your instincts and sympathies is to abandon genuine morality for transient emotions. One person who subscribed to the view that moral action requires strict adherence to principles and tradition was Osama bin Laden. 1.5

Osama bin Laden was, of course, the notorious terrorist mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. Bin Laden was not a madman or a lunatic, though, and if you read his writings you'll see that he was an articulate, educated spokesman for his views. Bin Laden believed that the Western nations are engaged in a Crusader war against Islam, and that God demands that the Islamic Caliphate (i.e. the theocratic rule of all Muslims under an official successor to the Prophet Muhammad) be restored to power, and that all nations follow Islamic religious law (*sharia*). In a post-9/11 interview, Bin Laden responded to the criticism that he sanctioned the killing of women, children, and innocents. 1.6

The scholars and people of the knowledge, amongst them Sahib al-Ikhtiyarat [ibn Taymiyya] and ibn al-Qayyim, and Shawanni, and many others, and Qutubi—may God bless him—in his Qur'an commentary, say that if the disbelievers were to kill our children and women, then we should not feel ashamed to do the same to them, mainly to deter them from trying to kill our women and children again. And that is from a religious perspective...

As for the World Trade Center, the ones who were attacked and who died in it were part of a financial power. It wasn't a children's school! Neither was it a residence. And the general consensus is that most of the people who were in the towers were men that backed the biggest financial force in the world, which spreads mischief throughout the world. And those individuals should stand before God, and rethink and redo their calculations. We treat others like they treat us. Those who kill our women and our innocent, we kill their women and innocent, until they stop doing so.

(Lawrence, 2005, pp. 118–119)

4 Ethics: Preliminary Views

- 1.7 Bin Laden was clearly concerned with the morality of killing “women and innocents;” he took pains to note that al-Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center, a financial building that—in his view—contained supporters of an materialist, imperialist nation of unbelievers. WTC was not a school or a home. Moreover, Bin Laden cited religious scholars and interpreters of the Qur’an to support his belief that killing noncombatants as a form of deterrence is a morally permissible act, sanctioned by his religion. Bin Laden was a devout and pious man who scrupulously adhered to his moral principles. If you think that he was a wicked, mass-murdering evildoer, it is not because he failed to be principled. It is because you find his principles to be bad ones.
- 1.8 What proof is there that Bin Laden’s moral principles are the wrong ones? None, really, other than an appeal to our common ethical intuitions that the intentional murder of innocents to further some idiosyncratic political or religious goal is morally heinous. If you disagree, it may be that your moral compass points in such an opposite direction that you don’t have enough in common with ordinary folks to engage in meaningful moral discussion. Even Bin Laden worried that it is wrong to kill children and women, which is why he was careful to justify his actions.
- 1.9 Just because you base your actions on some rule, principle, or moral code that you’ve adopted or created is no guarantee that you’ll do the right thing. You could have a bad moral code. Of course, everyone thinks their own moral code is correct, but that’s no guarantee that it is—just look at Bin Laden. Well, is it better to base your actions on your intuitions, on the feelings you have about whatever situation is at hand? Not necessarily. Feelings are immediate and case-specific, and the situation right in front of us is always the most vivid and pressing. Your gut instincts may lead you to choose short-term benefits over what’s best in the long term. For example, imagine a mother who has taken a toddler in for a vaccination. The child is crying, not wanting to feel the pain of the needle. Surely the mother’s instincts are to whisk the child away from the doctor advancing with his sharp pointy stick. Yet sometimes the right action is to set our feelings aside to see the larger picture. The mother has a moral obligation to care for her child, and so must hold back her protective sympathies and force the child to get the shot.
- 1.10 If we can’t trust our moral principles and rules (because we might have bad principles and rules), and we can’t trust our moral intuitions (because our sympathies might be short-sighted and narrow), then what should we do? The most prominent approach is to use the best of both worlds. We should use our most fundamental moral intuitions to constrain and craft

moral theories and principles. This approach does not mean that we just capitulate to our gut instincts. Sometimes our principles should override those instincts. At the same time, when our principles or theories tell us to perform actions that are in conflict with our deepest feelings and intuitions, that is a reason to re-examine those principles and perhaps revise them or even reject them outright. Such a procedure apparently never occurred to Bin Laden, who either felt no sympathy for his victims, or was unflinchingly convinced of the righteousness of his cause.

The idea that moral rules be tested against our intuitions is analogous to the scientific method by which scientific theories are tested against experiments and direct observations. Sometimes a really fine and widely repeated experiment convinces everyone that a scientific theory cannot be right, and sometimes experimental results or observations are dismissed as faulty because they come into conflict with an otherwise well confirmed and excellent theory. There is no hard-and-fast way to decide how to go. How would all this play out in the case of ethics? 1.11

Here is a simple example to illustrate the procedure, before we move on to taking a look at the more prominent moral theories. Consider the so-called **Golden Rule**¹, a moral rule dating from antiquity that appears in various forms in a variety of different ancient authors and traditions. It states: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. What intuitions could be used as evidence against this rule? Put another way, what's counterintuitive about it, if anything? Well, the Golden Rule implicitly assumes that everyone has the same preferences. That assumption seems a bit questionable. Suppose that you like backrubs. In fact, you'd like a backrub from pretty much anyone. The Golden Rule advises you to treat other people the way you would like to be treated. Since you'd like other people to give you unsolicited backrubs, you should, according to the Golden Rule, give everyone else a backrub, even if they didn't ask for one. But some people don't like backrubs, or don't care for strangers touching them. Intuitively, it would be wrong to give backrubs to those people without their consent, or against their will. Since this intuition conflicts with the Golden Rule's implication to administer unsolicited backrubs, we should conclude that maybe the Golden Rule is really iron pyrite after all. 1.12

You might respond that we should revise the Golden Rule to avoid the unwanted implication, or we should replace it with a more precise moral rule. Perhaps, *Do unto others as they would have be done unto them*, or some such. Of course, that formulation means we would have to give others whatever they ask of us, which is surely more than we should have to provide. That's 1.13

just how moral philosophy proceeds— we modify our moral views in light of compelling arguments and counterexamples, or sometimes go back to the drawing board altogether to come up with better theories.

1.2 Divine Command Theory (Is Morality Just What God Tells Me to Do?)

1.14 Morality could be like the law in this sense: an authority is needed to tell us what our moral duties are, and to enforce the rules. Without a lawgiver, a ruler to lay down the moral law, we are adrift with no deeper connection to right and wrong than our own transient preferences. Traditionally, God has been considered to be this moral authority. You might think that if God does not exist, then everything is permitted. The need for God as a source of morality is often cited as a motivation—maybe *the* motivation—to be religious; that the ethical life is possible only within a religious context. It is endorsed, as we saw above, by Osama bin Laden, and promoted by no end of Christian ministers, pundits and politicians. It is well worth thinking through.

1.15 Divine command theory is not new, nor is it connected with any particular religion. Orthodox Jews subscribe to the **613 mitzvot**², the complete list of Yahweh's commandments in the Torah, including not to gather grapes that have fallen to the ground, not to eat meat with milk, and not to wear garments of wool and linen mixed together. Christians recall the **Ten Commandments**³ that Yahweh gave to Moses or the instructions of Jesus to love God and also to love one's neighbor as oneself. Muslims emphasize the value of having a good character, which is built by following the **five pillars of Islam**⁴: believing that there is no God but Allah, offering daily prayers, performing charity, engaging in fasting, and going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Such actions and beliefs are all moral obligations as laid down by the deities of those respective religions.

1.16 The proposal that morality is essentially connected to religion has two chief components:

1. God loves (endorses, recommends, advocates) all good actions and hates (forbids, abjures, prohibits) all evil actions.
2. We can figure out which is which; that is, we can know what God loves and what he hates.

Let's consider these in turn. Grant for the sake of argument that there is a morally perfect God, that is, there is a God who loves everything good and hates everything evil (for more on the attributes of God, see Chapter 3). For the purposes of this discussion, it doesn't matter whether goodness/badness is primarily a quality of persons, actions, characters, or what have you. The notion of a perfectly good God is that his attitudes are in perfect sync with morality. 1.17

Plato discussed the idea that morality and religion are inseparable 2500 years ago in his dialogue *Euthyphro*⁵. In the dialogue, the characters of Socrates and Euthyphro try to figure out the nature of piety, that is, right action. After some back and forth, Euthyphro proposes that right action is what all the gods love, and evil actions are what all the gods hate. In this way he explicitly ties morality to the choices and preferences of the gods. 1.18

Plato was no atheist—by all accounts he, like his mentor Socrates, respected and accepted **the official Greek gods**⁶. Nevertheless, Plato thought that even if the gods are perfectly good, that fact is not enough to explain morality. Plato scrutinizes Euthyphro's connection between morality and what the gods love by raising this very subtle and interesting question, here phrased for modern monotheists: 1.19

- Are things good because God loves them, or does he love them because they are good?

Even though God loves everything good and hates everything bad, the Euthyphro question presents two very different options about God's love. 1.20

Option A. Things are good because God loves them. This means that it is God's love that *makes* things good, and his dislike that *makes* things bad. Prior to, or considered independently of, God's judgment, things don't have moral qualities at all. If it weren't for God, nothing would be right or wrong, good or bad. Moral properties are the result of God's decisions, like candy sprinkles he casts over the vanilla ice cream of the material world.

Option B. God loves good things because they are good. On this option, things are good (or bad) antecedently to, and independently of, God. In other words, things already have their moral properties, and God, who is an infallible judge of such matters, always loves the good things and hates the bad things. Morality is an independent objective standard apart from God. God always responds appropriately to this standard (loving all the good stuff and hating the bad), but morality is separate from, and unaffected by, his judgments. 1.24

- 1.22 So which is it? Option A, where God creates the moral qualities of things, or Option B, where God is the perfect ethical thermometer, whose opinions accurately reflect the moral temperature of whatever he judges? Following Plato, here are some interrelated reasons to prefer Option B.
- 1.23 First, think about something you love. You love your mom? The Philadelphia Eagles? Taylor Swift? Bacon cheeseburgers? Your pet dog? French roast coffee? All good choices. Now, reflect on why you love them. You can give reasons, right? You love your mom, but not everyone's mom, because she raised you, cares for you, is kind to you, etc. Other moms didn't do that. You love Taylor Swift because of her charisma, upbeat lyrics, and catchy pop hooks. You love French roast coffee over milder roasts because you really like the pungent, smoky, bitter brew it produces. You get the idea. In other words, your love is grounded in reasons for loving.
- 1.24 Suppose your friend Matt said he loves Domino's pizza more than Little Caesars'. You ask him why—is it the sauce? The crust? The toppings? The price? If Matt said no to all that and that he just loves Domino's more for *no reason at all*, well, that would be downright bizarre. It might not always be easy to come up with the reasons why you love one thing over another, but if someone literally had no reasons whatsoever, it would be perplexingly mysterious why they love that thing. Matt's love of Domino's pizza would be arbitrary.
- 1.25 Second, our emotions and feelings are in part judgments that respond to the world around us. If you are angry, you are angry for a reason—you believe that someone insulted you, or cut you off in traffic, or whatever. When emotions do not have this component of judgment, we generally think that something has gone wrong. For example, if someone is depressed because they lost their job and their spouse died, then depression is a reasonable reaction—it is a rational response to real-world events. On the other hand, if someone is depressed but has no good reason to feel blue, then we naturally look for a different kind of explanation of their depression. We may look for a causal explanation involving brain chemistry; perhaps they have serotonin deficiency, say. Irrational depression is a medical problem. Similarly, if someone is angry all the time for no apparent reason, we are liable to say that they have an anger problem, and should seek therapy. In other words, irrational emotions unconnected to facts about the world are a sign of mental stress or illness.
- 1.26 Under Option A God has no reasons at all for loving one thing over another. As soon as he loves something, then it *becomes* good, pious, and right. So there is no *moral reason* for God to declare murder wrong instead

of right. This means that morality is completely arbitrary; the fact that rape and murder are immoral is random. God could have just as easily made rape and murder your moral duty. What's to stop him? He's God after all, and he decides what's right and wrong. You can't very well insist that God would not have made murder your positive moral duty, because murder is immoral—that's to assume that morality is an objective standard apart from God's decisions, which is Option B. We're here assuming Option A is true.

Third, God could change his mind at any minute. He might show up and declare that he's gotten bored with all those old commandments and instructions, and that he's issuing some new moral laws. Covet thy neighbor's wife. Do unto others before they do unto you. Eat bacon sandwiches on the Sabbath. Carve graven images of Muhammad. Thou shalt kill. If he were to declare these new rules the moral law, then they would in fact become your moral duties. Perhaps you think that God would never do such a thing. Well, why not? If you think that he is obliged to be consistent in his moral dictates, then you are setting up consistency as an objective external normative standard that God must respect. Yet the whole idea of Option A is that God's opinions *establish* the normative universe, not that they abide by it. 1.27

To sum up, under Option A morality is random and arbitrary. God chooses some things to be good and others to be bad without any reasons whatsoever for his choice. His preferences are based on nothing at all, and he might as well be rolling dice to decide what to love and what to hate. Indeed, such random emotional judgments, unconstrained by external facts, are more indicative of mental illness or a loss of control than a divinely omniscient mind. Moreover, literally any action could be your moral duty, and will be the minute God declares that he loves it. The cherry on top is that there's no reason God wouldn't or couldn't reverse all his previous opinions and turn morality upside down. Expect the unexpected. 1.28

If you think that those results are a bunch of crazy talk—as Plato did—then you should conclude that God's love does not make things good. Instead, vote for Option B: God loves things because they are good. That is, God's judgments flawlessly track moral reality; he invariably loves the good and hates the wicked. God may be a perfect judge, but he does not make the moral law. In other words, morality and religion are logically separate, which means that whether God exists has nothing to do with whether there are moral facts or what those facts are. 1.29

Now, you might suggest at this point that even if God does not make morality, nevertheless the smart move is to pay attention to his moral advice. God is supposedly morally perfect, so as an ethical role model, there's no one 1.30

better. Since morality is a hard thing to figure out, if God's got it all solved for us, we should listen up—scripture's just *Ethics for Dummies*⁷.

- 1.31 While this is certainly an approach we might try, as a practical matter it is not exactly smooth sailing. Here's what we'll need to do. Step one: prove that a perfectly good God exists. Step two: prove that there are no other Gods whose moral opinions we must also consult. That is, not only is your religion right but also everyone else's is also wrong. Step three: show how we can know what God's moral views are. If you think that the Qur'an, the Bible, the Torah, the Upanishads, or whatever are the word of the Lord, you'll need to prove that. Or if you believe you have God's cell phone number, and he's letting you know what he thinks, you'll need to show why you're not just delusional instead. Step four: offer a clear and unequivocal interpretation of God's moral views. We might be able to pull off all these things. But each of the steps is mighty heavy lifting. If Plato is right, and morality and religion are logically independent, then we *can* investigate ethics without debating religion. Perhaps the smart practical move is to do that very thing.

1.3 Egoism (Is Morality Just My Own Personal Code?)

- 1.32 Maybe morality is just a matter of each individual's personal ethical views, along the lines of the following sentiments:

- Morality is just whatever you believe it is.
- Everyone has their own morality.
- Real morality is just "look out for #1."
- Here's the real Golden Rule: he who has the gold makes the rules.
- **"What is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after"**⁸ (Ernest Hemingway).
- "Man's greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding, use the bodies of his women as a nightshirt and a support, gazing upon and kissing their rosy breasts, sucking their lips which are sweet as the berries of their breasts" (Genghis Khan).
- **"What is best in life is to crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of their women"**⁹ (Conan the Barbarian).
- **"The achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose"**¹⁰ (Ayn Rand).

There are two distinct ideas expressed by these slogans, and we should pry them apart. One is a purely descriptive thesis about human psychology, namely: 1.33

Psychological egoism: everyone always acts in their own self-interest.

The other idea is a normative thesis about morality, namely 1.34

Ethical egoism: everyone *should* always act in their own self-interest.

Both of these theses could be true. Obviously, if psychological egoism is true, then fulfilling one's moral duties according to ethical egoism is a piece of cake. It's easy to do what you can't avoid doing anyway. Or it could be that psychological egoism is true and ethical egoism is false, in which case everyone acts selfishly, but that's just evidence of flawed human beings who must struggle against their nature to do the right thing. Or perhaps ethical egoism is true but psychological egoism is false, in which case everyone ought to just look out for themselves, but misguided social pressure forces us to sacrifice for others. Or perhaps both psychological and ethical egoism are false. 1.35

Let's take a look at these two in turn. First up is a popular argument for psychological egoism, namely that altruism is always merely superficial and the authentic springs of actions are invariably self-interested ones. The idea is that even people who sacrifice for others, donate to charity, feed the poor, etc. only do so because it makes them feel good about themselves, or impresses others. Nobody would help other people if they didn't get something in return—self-satisfaction, self-esteem, community respect, higher social standing, better choice of mates. On the surface charity looks like altruism, but when we dig a little deeper we can see that it is self-interest after all. Sometimes “altruism” is obviously selfish, as in the case of someone who tithes to the church or gives alms to the poor in order to get a quick pass into heaven. No matter what you do, you get something out of it, or you wouldn't be doing it. Which is just to say that everyone always acts in their self-interest; we just can't help it. 1.36

Without question, *sometimes* people behave in psychologically egoistic ways, and apparent altruism is just virtue signaling in disguise. But does human behavior always follow this pattern? Let's investigate what would count as evidence that at least *sometimes* people are genuinely altruistic, and that therefore psychological egoism is false. 1.37

- 1.38 Consider an act of putative self-sacrifice, in which Generous George gives away a considerable amount of money to a needy stranger. The psychological egoist is committed not only to the view that George stands to benefit in some way (for example, by feeling good about himself) but his benefit outweighs the cost of getting it. Otherwise, it is a net loss for George. Put another way, one can't reasonably argue that Saleswoman Sarah is a smart car dealer if she keeps selling cars for less than the dealership paid for them. Losing money is not self-interested behavior. She acts in her self-interest only if she's making a profit and selling cars for more than her company paid for them. Likewise Generous George isn't acting in his self-interest if what he's getting out of his charity is less valuable than the money he's giving away.
- 1.39 Here, then, is a test for egoistic action: *An action is egoistic only if the benefits to the giver exceed the cost of the giving.* Put conversely, if the benefits to the giver are less than the value of the gift, then the action is not egoistic. Now that we know in principle how to refute psychological egoism, are there any real-life, actual cases of non-egoistic behavior? The answer is yes.
- 1.40 Ross McGinnis was a 19-year-old Army private from Pennsylvania serving in the Iraq War. One December day he was manning an M2 .50-caliber machine gun in the turret of a Humvee patrolling Baghdad's Adhamiyah district. A rooftop enemy insurgent lobbed a fragmentation grenade at the Humvee, which fell through the gunner's hatch and landed near McGinnis. He immediately yelled, "the grenade is in the truck" and threw himself on it. His quick action allowed all four members of his crew to prepare for the blast. According to the Army, "**McGinnis absorbed all lethal fragments and the concussive effects of the grenade with his own body**"¹¹. He was killed instantly. His platoon sergeant later stated that McGinnis could have jumped from the Humvee to safety; instead he chose to save the lives of four other men at the sacrifice of his own. For his bravery McGinnis was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.
- 1.41 McGinnis certainly did not act in his own self-interest. He received no benefit at all from his heroism, and even the Medal of Honor is cold comfort to his grieving family, who would have much preferred the safe return of their son. It is an understatement to observe that the value of his gift—saving the lives of four fellow soldiers—was greater than what he got in return, which was merely death.
- 1.42 You might be inclined to argue that McGinnis is a rare exception, and that heroic self-sacrifice is far from the norm. Maybe psychological egoism isn't true of every human being ever to live, but it could still be true of the vast majority. You might think that *nearly* everyone always acts in their

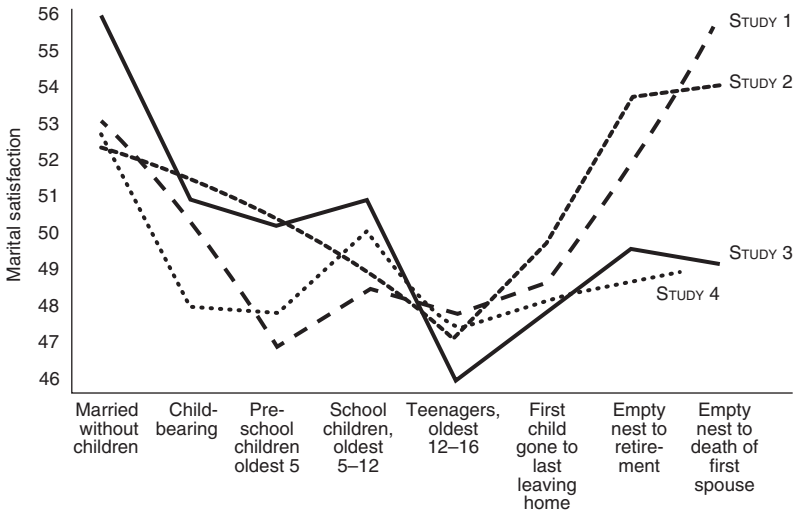
own self-interest. Yet even this modified claim of predominant egoism is apparently false.

Consider child rearing. One of the most pervasive beliefs around the world is that having children will make people happy. Childless couples imagine a future filled with beautiful, successful, loving children, of cheerful holiday dinners and birthday parties at the park. Parents whose children are grown look back fondly on family traditions, vacations taken, and funny episodes of life. So parents encourage their childless friends and adult children to have kids of their own, they tell them that kids are wonderful, a blessing not to be missed. Everyone is happier with a brood. Sure, there are diapers to be changed, homework to monitor, and orthodontists to be paid, but all in all, the hard work of parenting pays back big dividends. 1.43

Recent studies have shown, however, that “children will make you happy” is a myth. In fact, children make you less happy. The family life of an average person will be a lot less happy with children than without them. Psychologists who study happiness with sophisticated surveys and tests have discovered that couples tend to start out quite happy in their marriages, but grow increasingly less happy over the course of their lives together until the children leave home. It is not until they reach “empty nest” that the parents’ marital happiness levels return to what they were pre-children. The Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert plotted the results from four different happiness studies (Figure 1.1), all of which tell the same story (Gilbert, 2005, p. 243). 1.44

Given the evidence that children make our home lives less happy, why does everyone insist on the opposite? In Gilbert’s view, we are all wired by evolution to deceive ourselves—and others—about how much having kids decreases our happiness. Even though studies repeatedly show that women (historically the primary care givers) are less happy taking care of their children than when eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching TV (Gilbert, p. 243), our subconscious minds ignore the evidence and tell us the opposite. Imagine a world in which everyone believed the truth that having kids will, on the whole, only add to your misery. Apart from accidents, people would stop having them. Failing to reproduce is the fastest way for a species to go extinct, so evolution builds in some safeguards, including self-deception about what actually makes us happy. 1.45

If the happiness researchers are right, then having and raising children is a genuine act of altruism. The benefits to the giver, in this case the parents, are less than the value of the gift, namely the gift of life and the resources to survive until adulthood. Having children is one of the most common human activities, and not a rare act of courage like that of Private McGinnis. When 1.46



As the four separate studies in this graph show, marital satisfaction decreases dramatically after the birth of the first child and increases only when the last child leaves home.

Figure 1.1 Marital satisfaction.

you decide to ignore the happiness findings and go on to have children (as most of the readers of this book will), you will be intentionally performing a pure act of altruism, in the full knowledge that you will be giving benefits to others with a net loss to your own happiness. The evidence is thus that psychological egoism is false. People routinely do not act in their own self-interest.

1.47 How about ethical egoism? Perhaps we *should* all be acting in our own self-interest. Earlier we proposed testing ethical theories against our most basic and ingrained intuitions about permissible actions. What are the intuitive pros and cons of ethical egoism?

1.48 On the plus side, egoism captures the idea that each human life has intrinsic merit. It allows each person to view their own life as being of ultimate value, thereby taking the importance of the human individual seriously. Any moral philosophy that requires sacrifices for others compels individuals to set their own interests aside in order to promote the welfare of people whom they may not care about. Compulsory sacrifice suggests that an individual's life is something at the disposal of others, not something to be valued for its own sake.

More concretely, suppose that you have a grilled cheese sandwich. It's legitimately yours—you bought it fairly with money you legally earned though your own labor. Imagine that as you leave the Cheeses Lady food truck with your lunch you see a hungry beggar. You could give him your sandwich, or you could keep walking and enjoy it yourself. Let's suppose that he would get much more out of the grilled cheese than you would; he hasn't eaten in two days whereas you haven't eaten for two hours. Nevertheless, there is an intuition that it is *your* sandwich to do with as you please. If you choose to give it to the beggar then of course you may, but if you eat it yourself, then that's your prerogative too. Egoism effortlessly explains why there's nothing wrong with you keeping and eating your own lunch, even when it would benefit others even more. As we will see later, other moral theories, such as utilitarianism, can't easily allow such a simple thing. 1.48

Another argument is that we are each best suited to figure out what our own wants and needs are. Maybe the kinds of things you want out of life aren't the things your parents want. There are many different visions of the good life—a yurt in the desert, living off the grid, communing with nature and smoking homegrown cannabis; a condo on the upper East Side in Manhattan with a Porsche in the parking garage; a cloistered monastery in the Italian Alps with prayers and silence. People ought to each pursue their own vision of the best life for themselves and be free to do so. If we interfere in each other's lives, even out of a sense of beneficence, we are more likely to make a botch job of it. We'll just wind up imposing our own values on each other, when it is far better for each of us to pursue our own interests. 1.50

Now, you might think that if ethical egoism were widely adopted that it would result in a bunch of uncooperative, self-absorbed loners. However, that's not true. Ethical egoism is entirely compatible with collective action based on reciprocity. You may decide to help your neighbor work on his roof because you know that later on he'll help you with your deck. Or you might decide to pool your money with your friends and get a keg of beer, knowing that you'll get a better price for such a bulk purchase. Everyone profits by having more beer for less money, including you. In these cases each person acts to promote their own self-interest, but other people benefit as well. The image of ethical egoism is the wolfpack—hunting together the pack can take down a moose, but each wolf is out to benefit itself. 1.51

What's the downside of ethical egoism? There are three main objections to egoism. 1.52

- 1.53 *Objection 1: horrible consequences.* There are many intuitively heinous actions that, under ethical egoism, are morally permissible. For egoists, nothing that people do to each other in the name of their own self-interest is immoral. Consider the following. In 1991 Phillip and Nancy Garrido of Antioch, California kidnapped a blond, pony-tailed 11-year-old little girl named Jaycee Lee Dugard. For the next 18 years they kept her prisoner in their backyard while they raped her. Phillip Garrido fathered two children with Jaycee, the first when she was only 14 years old, and kept the children isolated, uneducated, and captive. The children had never been to a doctor. In 2009 the Garridos were discovered and arrested. Or consider the case of Kristen Diane Parker, a surgery technician at a Colorado hospital. A heroin addict, she routinely stole Fentanyl, a powerful painkiller, from cancer patients, whom she left in pain as she replaced their drugs with saline. As she carelessly switched her used syringes for fresh ones, Parker infected three dozen people with hepatitis C. Eventually she was caught and sentenced to 20 years in prison.
- 1.54 Every day newspaper headlines tell of cases just like these, where people are acting in their own self-interest without regard for others. If you think that Parker and the Garridos are moral monsters, brutal narcissists who have no place in a civilized society, then you should doubt that ethical egoism is the correct theory of morality. After all, under ethical egoism their actions were not merely permissible, but, since they served to advance their own interests, their positive moral duty. Remember, the thesis of ethical egoism is that everyone *should* always act in their own self-interest, which the Garridos and Parker apparently did. When the kidnapping and sexual enslavement of children and the theft of painkillers from cancer victims turn out to be anyone's moral duty, one might reasonably question the moral theory at hand.
- 1.55 A defender of ethical egoism might argue that in fact the Garridos and Parker failed to act in their own self-interest, on the grounds that they were caught, convicted, and sent to prison. Surely imprisonment was not in their self-interest. That's why their actions were wrong; they led to negative consequences for themselves down the road. However, such a defense means that kidnapping, rape, and theft are morally heinous only if you are caught—if you get away with your crimes, then you did nothing wrong after all. Such a defense goes against the intuition that it would have been far worse for Phillip Garrido to continue child rape and enslavement, far worse for Kristen Diane Parker to have continued to infect people with Hepatitis C and steal pain meds from cancer patients.

If the world was made better by their capture, then the egoist defense does not work.

Objection 2: subjectivity. The second objection to ethical egoism is that it makes morality wholly subjective, in just the same manner as matters of taste. Many people think that if anything is purely subjective, then taste is. Thus there is no objective fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes delicious, or whether roses smell better than lilacs. There are simply personal preferences; some like roses better, others lilacs. It is hardly a matter over which we might have violent disagreement, or, really, any meaningful disagreement at all. You like one and your friend likes the other. You acknowledge each other's preferences and move on. How exercised can one really get about Coke vs. Pepsi, or what your favorite color is? 1.56

If ethical egoism is correct, then morality is just as subjective as matters of taste. Suppose Joe thinks eating babies is morally wrong and Jane thinks eating babies is not only morally permissible, but delicious to boot. As in the cases of taste, there is no true disagreement between Joe and Jane—they are doing no more than expressing the preferences they have, in light of the goals and desires they each possess. Joe advances his interests by not eating babies, and Jane advances her (presumably culinary) interests through cannibalism. Joe is doing the morally right thing (for Joe) and Jane is doing the morally right thing (for Jane). Therefore they are in no position to criticize each other. The most each could say is “I wouldn't do what you're doing—but by all means, carry on.” The ethical egoist credo is live and let live, or, perhaps *de gustibus non est disputandum*¹². Each is acting to pursue their own self-interest, which is exactly what ethical egoism says they ought to do. If you think that it is entirely reasonable and morally fair to criticize Jane for her cannibalism, then ethical egoism is not the correct moral theory. 1.57

Objection 3: equal treatment. The third objection to ethical egoism is that it violates an intuitively plausible constraint on moral theories, namely the principle of equal treatment. 1.58

Principle of equal treatment: Two people should be treated in the same way unless there is a relevant difference between them. 1.59

The Principle of Equal Treatment does not require that everyone be treated alike; it allows variable treatment. Discrimination gets a bad name because people tend to conflate reasonable discrimination with unreasonable discrimination. If you were choosing up sides for a basketball team, no one would expect you to pick an overweight 4'11" senior citizen over a 6'11" college athlete. Fitness, age, and height are all relevant criteria for basket- 1.60

ball performance. Likewise if you're hiring someone to be the pastor of your church, it is reasonable to expect that a successful candidate will follow that religion. Atheists need not apply. These are cases of discrimination—treating people differently—but there are relevant differences that make the varying treatment permissible and expected.

1.61 The cases in the preceding paragraph are judicial discrimination. There is also prejudicial discrimination, which is more pernicious. If one picks basketball players on the basis of religion, or hires a pastor on the basis of height, then that is treating people differently when there is no difference among them relevant to basketball or job performance. It is because those cases violate the Principle of Equal Treatment that we tend to regard them as cases of immoral treatment.

1.62 The problem for ethical egoism is that egoism counsels each person to treat everyone differently from how they treat themselves, irrespective of whether there is any relevant difference. As an ethical egoist you will act to advance your own interests regardless of how that may affect the interests of others. However, the Principle of Equal Treatment states that you should treat two people the same unless there is some relevant difference between them. What, then, is the relevant difference between you and everyone else that you should give no weight whatsoever to their preferences? Ethical egoism implies that you are so unique and special that you ought to treat every other person differently from how you treat yourself, since you should care only about promoting your own interests. You're you; that's true. But what makes you so special? In fact, runs the objection, none of us is so special that we should each treat ourselves completely differently from how we treat every other living creature. In short, ethical egoism is just a form of prejudicial discrimination, and for that reason should be discarded.

1.63 If you think the costs of ethical egoism are too high for its benefits, then you should consider other moral theories before making a purchase. Here's another popular contender.

1.4 Moral Relativism (Is Morality Just How Society Says We Should Act?)

1.64 According to ethical egoism, morality is no more than your own code of behavior, designed to advance your own goals. Perhaps morality should be understood not on the personal level but on the social level. Here are some representative slogans of this idea, the idea of *moral relativism*.

- **When in Rome, do as the Romans do.**¹³
- **What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.**¹⁴
- **“Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason that the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in”**¹⁵ (Michel de Montaigne, 1580).

Moral relativism, as presented here, is ethical egoism writ large. With ethical egoism, morality is relativized to individuals; but with moral (sometimes called *cultural*) relativism, moral truth is relativized at a broader scale to cultures or societies themselves. To some extent, debates over moral relativism are just analogues to the pros and cons of egoism. 1.65

To start with, notice that there is a difference between descriptive relativism and moral relativism, as follows: 1.66

Descriptive relativism: *beliefs* about morality and the values people possess vary across cultures divided by times and places.

Moral relativism: *the truth* of moral claims and which values people should adopt vary across cultures divided by times and places. What is morally permissible in one culture may be morally wrong in another culture.

Moral relativism is attractive in lots of ways. For one, it serves to counterbalance the provincialism of assuming that the moral principles and codes that you’ve grown up with must be the best ones for everyone in the world. You probably know people who have never gone more than 20 miles away from the same small town in which they were born, and think that their little corner of the world has everything one could want—the best barbecue, as solid citizens as you’ll meet anywhere, fine schools, good-looking children, devout churchgoers, sincere patriots, and first-rate scholars. But if you’ve traveled a bit, or moved in from another part of the world, you are probably aghast at such insularity and ignorance. People all over the world have found different forms of the good life, with views about purity, authority, respect and piety that may be wholly alien to one’s own. A young woman from Saudi Arabia may consider American college students in miniskirts to be no better than immodest whores who conveniently label themselves with tramp stamps, and American coeds may think that Saudi women are living under the false consciousness of repressive patriarchy, yet both groups manage to raise their children and find ways to lead satisfying lives.

- 1.67 Worse than provincialism is imperialism. When practitioners of a religion decide that they have discovered the one true way that everyone ought to live, the results tend to be the Spanish Inquisition and people flying airplanes into skyscrapers. When countries decide that their form of political economy alone will lead to human flourishing, then we get wars to force others to accept democracy, or become communists, or subjects of the Crown, or whatever it will take to remake foreigners into people Just Like Us. Moral relativism is offered as a corrective to such arrogant and aggressive moral absolutism, one that respects cultural diversity and allows for more than one decent way to live.
- 1.68 The preceding reflections give rise to a popular argument for moral relativism, which goes as follows. Moral beliefs vary all over the world, from place to place and from time to time. The values crafted by a tribe or a nation fit their specific circumstances and may be completely at odds with the moral codes of other societies—codes that they developed given their own idiosyncratic situation. The harsh morality of **Sparta**¹⁶, beset by warring enemies in a dry and rocky terrain, is hardly suited for the laid-back free-love natives of the tropical **Trobriand Islands**¹⁷. Insisting that every culture must have the same morality is like telling a chef that every dish he prepares must have the same spicing. The results will range from excellent, to palatable, to execrable. Moralities grow organically, and what works in one culture is inappropriate for another. Not only do moral beliefs and values vary across societies, but they should. In other words, the fact of descriptive relativism provides an excellent reason to adopt moral relativism.
- 1.69 The argument just provided assumes that descriptive relativism is true, assumes that if it is true then moral relativism is true, and then infers from those premises that moral relativism is true. Let's examine the very first claim: is descriptive moral relativism really true? There can be little doubt that moral practices, customs and beliefs vary considerably from one society to the next. For Muslims, it is immoral to drink alcohol, yet for most Christians it is a sacramental imperative to drink alcohol. Western European societies consider the death penalty immoral, whereas China does not. In the United States, polygamous marriages are considered unethical, but in Islamic countries and the indigenous cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, they are expected. The ancient Spartans considered it their moral duty to leave weak or defective infants alone to die from the elements, and perhaps no modern society condones such a practice.
- 1.70 On the face of it, then, it seems that moral beliefs are quite variable from one society to another. However, it would be hasty to conclude that descrip-

tive relativism is unequivocally right. The anthropologist Donald E. Brown has identified 373 traits as **human universals**¹⁸—characteristics present in every human society that has so far been identified and studied (Brown, 1991, ch. 6). Some of these traits are facts about language use, patterns of inferential reasoning, symbolic gesturing, and the structure of social groups. However, the majority of human universals involve moral or proto-moral judgment and behavior. For example, human societies universally judge that it is good to help others, that incest and indiscriminate killing are wrong, and that one has familial duties of piety towards one's parents and obligations of care towards one's children.

Some philosophers have argued that universally adopted moral norms are very general and open-ended, therefore allowing for local interpretation and variation. Just as every society has *some* language but they don't all have the *same* language, every society forbids incest as immoral but they don't all pick out the same family members as off-limits. One society might condone kissing cousins (cousins don't count for the incest taboo) and a second society condemns them. It doesn't matter for our purposes here. As a purely descriptive matter, descriptive relativism turns out to be partly true and partly false. There are moral beliefs present in some societies/cultures, but not in all, and other moral attitudes that do seem to be in all societies. But the fact that there are at least some moral universals stops any simple inference from descriptive relativism to moral relativism. 1.71

A second reason to reject the argument that descriptive relativism leads to moral relativism is as follows. Descriptive relativism, if true, is something that anthropologists ought to discover. Moral relativism, on the other hand, is not a matter for anthropology. Consider an analogy. Anthropologists and historians have provided convincing evidence that human societies throughout history have had a great variety of scientific and medical beliefs. For instance, commonplace beliefs in some societies have been that Earth is the center of the universe, that the motion of the sun is due to the gods' pulling a fiery chariot, that insanity is caused by demonic possession, that base metals can be turned into gold through chemical manipulation, and sickness is caused by an imbalance in the four bodily humors. 1.72

As a matter of mere description, there is no problem noting that these empirical claims were widely believed in assorted societies throughout history. Nevertheless, modern science and scientific medicine have now shown that all of those beliefs are false. Thus we may say that descriptive scientific relativism is true, even though Earth is not the center of the universe, the sun doesn't really move across the sky, demons aren't behind insanity, alchemy is 1.73

a failure, and humorism has been completely discredited. That's just to say that people have had many false scientific beliefs. Perhaps people have had lots of false moral beliefs as well. Knowing what people in fact believe very rarely tells us what they ought to believe. Therefore the second premise of the relativist's argument, that if descriptive relativism is true then moral relativism is true, is also false.

1.74 A chief complaint against moral relativism is the *Criticism Objection*: if moral relativism is true, then meaningful criticism of either other societies, or even of one's own, is impossible. Here's why. Under moral relativism, the moral truth itself varies from one society or culture to the next. An act might be morally wrong in one society but morally permissible or even obligatory in another—not simply *believed* to be permissible or obligatory, but in *fact* permissible or obligatory. It would therefore make no sense whatsoever for people in the first society to criticize the members of the second society for their moral views since those views are, by hypothesis, true (in that society). To criticize them is to criticize the truth, which is surely misguided. Here is an illustration.

1.75 Female genital mutilation is a common practice in 30 different countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. **According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 200 million women and girls are living with the consequences of having their genitalia ritually mutilated**¹⁹. The procedure—typically involving prepubescent girls—can include removal of the clitoral hood, partial or total removal of the clitoris, removal of the labia minora, and the stitching together of the labia majora with thorns, allowing only a small opening for urine and menstrual blood to pass through. Their legs are tied together for weeks afterwards to allow the scar tissue to form. Village elders carry out these operations typically without sterilization or anesthesia. Medical consequences include loss of sexual pleasure, infertility, reproductive and urinary tract infections, and various risks concerning childbirth. Girls have also died from shock, blood loss, and infection as the result of female genital mutilation.

1.76 According to WHO, there is no medical benefit to these surgeries. So why are they performed? The answer is because of social mores. Social groups that practice female genital mutilation often do so because of their ethical views about proper sexual behavior, coupled with the idea that only by crippling women's libidos can they resist the temptations of illicit sex. There are also aesthetic beliefs regarding modesty and femininity, and the proper way that women should look. Finally, practitioners often believe that there are religious reasons for female genital mutilation, although no major religion condones it.

If we accept ethical relativism, then mutilating the genitals of young girls without their consent is morally acceptable—at least in places like Somalia and Egypt who do it to over 95% of their females. Again, not only do Somalians and Egyptians *believe* that it is morally acceptable, but it really *is* morally acceptable. Of course, it is immoral to maim children in other places, like the United States. Under ethical relativism, here are two true propositions: 1.77

Pro-FGM: There is nothing wrong with female genital mutilation (in central Africa).

Anti-FGM: Female genital mutilation is immoral (in the United States).

While it is consistent to hold both Pro-FGM and Anti-FGM, the objection to moral relativism is that one should not hold them both, because it is entirely reasonable to criticize female genital mutilation as cruel and wicked butchery. This is not ethnocentrism; in fact it takes the beliefs and practices of foreign cultures more seriously than does moral relativism. Moral relativism presumes that different cultures are so estranged that they cannot sensibly have a dialogue together about morality; instead each must go their own way. Yet allowing the possibility of criticism means that people from differing cultural traditions can reason together, discussing and critiquing each others' views, to discover the moral truth. Somalians are just as entitled to criticize Americans for *failing* to practice female genital mutilation. Accepting moral relativism precludes substantive ethical dialogue among differing cultures, but rejecting moral relativism allows potentially fruitful debate. In this way all cultures are treated as equal partners in the practice of reason. In other words, despite cultural relativism's pretensions to promoting tolerance and equality, in fact it does the opposite. True respect for the views of others comes from taking those views seriously through critical engagement. 1.78

Not only does the Criticism Objection apply to the criticism of foreign cultures, but also to one's own culture. For example, in 1830 slavery was widely accepted in the United States as morally permissible. There had been an abolitionist movement in North America since colonial times, but in 1830 it was still a minority voice. If we accept moral relativism, then both of these propositions are true: 1.79

Pro-slavery: There is nothing wrong with US slavery (in 1830).

Anti-slavery: There is something wrong with US slavery (now).

- 1.80 Given the truth of Pro-slavery, it must have been the case that in 1830 the abolitionists were just all mistaken. They were wrong for wanting to abolish slavery, and misguided in condemning slave-owners. Why? Because owning slaves was entirely morally permissible. If you think that in 1830 the abolitionists were on the side of the right and the good, despite being a minority, then Pro-slavery is false. Since moral relativism implies that Pro-slavery is true, just as it implies that Anti-slavery is true, moral relativism must also be false. Moral relativism prevents the coherent criticism of the failings of one's own society every bit as much as it disallows the coherent criticism of the practices of other cultures. If you think that we ought to review the popular morality of our culture, and aim for its improvement, then you have a reason to doubt that moral relativism is correct.

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