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First-order Metaethical Principles: Boylan's Philosophical Work on Ethics and Personhood Theory

Introduction

We begin our express voyage into ethical theory with an examination of first-order ethical principles as set out by this author. As mentioned earlier, there are two forms of metaethics: first and second order. In the first order the author sets out intellectual presuppositions that are necessary in order to structure some normative theory. These principles can apply to any of the realistic, naturalistic theories that are set out in the subsequent chapters: virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and deontology.

The anti-realistic theories set out that my definition of ethics – *the science of the right and wrong in human action* – is wrong. These authors do not think ethics is a "science" at all. A science looks at the world and discovers facts about how it operates. These facts are separate from the practitioner. The anti-realist believes that ethics is conventional and that individuals and communities impose these random commands upon their members just because they can. The sources of this justification are various. Let's quickly look at three.

First is ethical intuitionism. Ethical intuitionism is an approach to ethics that espouses to rely upon an immediate grasping of ethical truths. According to proponents, certain ethical responses are hard-wired into the human consciousness. Whether the cause of this hard-wiring is evolution or divine modeling (or both), it is not measurable and therefore cannot count as a fact about the world. Ethical intuitionism may be the most prevalent approach to ethics in the world. This is because of its mode of transmission: adages. These moral maxims are passed down from parents and grandparents in the form of pithy slogans. Sometimes these pithy slogans contradict each other, such as "Look before you leap" and "Faint heart never won fair maiden." In these situations, *intuition alone* picks the one that is cogent to the situation at hand. In other situations, it is up to the practitioner to pick out one or more adages that are relevant to the present problem. It

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is also possible for the practitioner to create a novel response invented by herself. The principal advantage of this approach is that it is easy to apply and easy to pass on to others (such as one's children). The downside is that there is no intersubjective objective data through which a discussion might be enjoined in cases of disagreement. Whenever this is the result in normative instances, violence or force is the deciding factor. So, unless one is a kraterist (an advocate of "might makes right"), ethical intuitionism has severe drawbacks.

Second is ethical contractarianism.[1] Under this approach whatever people agree to is ethical *because* of the agreement. Obviously, this biases toward individual and group autonomy as being the highest. Whatever is the result of free exchange among parties is *all right*. There are, of course, many instances in which consent is adequate for going forward. For example, if one goes to the doctor and there is a surgical procedure, then the physician solicits an informed consent form in order to proceed. This is an instance of consent within the agency realm of the individual only. When we expand the purview, Consent (with a capital "C") it is unclear how agency is decisive to normativity at all.[2] This realm of Consent affects communities of all sizes. This is because the group can be skewed in its outlook – such as a majority population discriminating against a minority population. The fact that the members of the majority population agree to this arrangement is not decisive – even if some members of the minority population go along with it.[3] People may also agree to conditions because they do not have adequate information and do not perform due diligence. Finally, there is the situation in which actors' consent to actions that most moral codes would find offensive (as defined by those normative ethical theories).[4] Certainly, autonomy is a capacity that all would endorse, and its exhibition in interpersonal interactions via consent should be supported. However, it is not clear whether this transfers over to Consent as a justification for ethics. This author is dubious.

Third is ethical non-cognitivism. This is a very popular form of normative ethics that is supported principally by those interested in linguistics, psychology,

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1 A prominent proponent of this position is John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

2 I have written about this in more detail in "Justification in Morality and the Law," in *Ethical Rationalism and the Law*, ed. Patrick Capps and Shaun Pattinson (London: Hart Publishing, 2016), 73–90.

3 Compare to Hegel's "master–slave dialectic" in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. James Black Baillie (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1931), 228–240.

4 Michael Boylan, *Basic Ethics* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2009), n78, 10–11. I cite the case of Wolf Sullowald, a former butcher who entered into a contract (consent) on an Internet site with an Austrian to be killed, butchered, and eaten. By all accounts the arrangement was agreeable to both sides – and there were witnesses. This is an extreme example of the defects in contractarianism as the foundation of ethical theory since it conflates consent with Consent.

sociology, and anthropology. This social science interest in non-cognitivism has to do with the general approach within the social sciences with the environmental effect of social institutions and apparatus upon the pliable human agent. For example, on the linguistic side, some would venture toward linguistic determinism in which the adoption of a language (and all that entails) reveals common normative bias. Then, on the social side, there is the effect of *nurture* via culture. This may be revealed via normal social analysis and may again bring in language (as a measure of behavior). Finally, psychology comes in as a way of expressing emotions: we create normative value on issues that we personally are interested in promoting. In all its forms ethical non-cognitivism is the most complex form of moral anti-realism. Because its language is social science and because social science has some basis in empiricism, this form of anti-realism is very compelling to those who (by disposition) are opposed to moral realism. And in the end, there is no way to prove either the realists or the anti-realists to be right in a way that is non-question begging for all.[5]

In contrast to the anti-realistic ethical position, realistic theories will be those accounts which set out that there are moral facts that are true or false. Anti-realistic theories assert that ethical theories are not about moral facts, but rather are expressions of emotion, or cultural conditioning, or artifacts of linguistic expression, or agreements entered upon by a group of people for particular purposes – such as laws. In each of these anti-realistic arrangements there are no *facts that are true or false*, but rather conventions that vary from time to time and from place to place. Under these accounts ethics is really a subject of anthropology and sociology: descriptive in its origin. Prescriptive power comes from social sanction and police departments only.

Naturalism refers to those realists who believe that the *facts* that they endorse exist in the natural world and can be discovered by people. Non-naturalists believe that the facts are not of this world, but of some other domain. Some ethicists and some religious moralists hold this position.[6]

This short text will take the position of realistic naturalism. It will examine first some first-order ethical principles as set out by this author in his own writings and then it will present three primary readings from three prominent philosophers: Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. In the end there are some pedagogical apparatuses to tie the textbook to the novels in the form of written assignments that fall in line with this approach.

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5 This is what I call the "rationality incompleteness conjecture": See Michael Boylan, *The Good, the True, and the Beautiful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 210.

6 A prominent advocate of this position is George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). Moore argues that "good," a key concept in ethics, is a non-natural property.

Boylan's First-order Metaethical Principles

For our purposes the extent of the first-order ethical principles will be: (i) the personal worldview imperative, (ii) the shared community worldview imperative (and other community worldview imperatives), (iii) the argument for the moral status of basic goods, and (iv) the table of embeddedness. These are not exhaustive, but they will serve our purposes here.[7]

The Personal Worldview Imperative

The personal worldview imperative is: "All people must develop a single comprehensive and internally coherent worldview that is good and that we strive to act out in our daily lives." There are four parts to the personal worldview imperative: completeness, coherence, connection to a theory of the good, and practicality. Let's briefly say something about each.

First is *completeness*. Completeness refers to the ability of a theory or ethical system to handle all cases put before it and to determine an answer based upon the system's recommendations. This is functionally achieved via the creation of a goodwill. The goodwill is a mechanism by which we decide how to act in the world. The goodwill provides completeness to everyone who develops one.

There are two senses of the goodwill. The first is the *rational goodwill*, which means that each agent will develop an understanding about what reason requires of us as we go about our business in the world. Completeness means that reason (governed by the personal worldview and its operational ethical standpoint) should always be able to come up with an answer to a difficult life decision. In the case of ethics, the rational goodwill requires engaging in a rationally based philosophical ethics and abiding by what reason demands. Often this plays out practically in examining and justifying various moral maxims – such as maxim-alpha: "one has a moral responsibility to follow through on one's commitments, *ceteris paribus*." This maxim is about promise making – call it maxim-alpha. For example, one could imagine that an employer named Fred hired Olga on the basis of her résumé and a Skype interview which did not reveal her mobility challenges (she needs a walker to get from points A to B for perambulation). Fred promises Olga the job but when she shows up to work Fred determines that Olga does not fit the *image* of the company that he wishes to exude: *vibrant*, *athletic*, and *potent.* A person in a walker is discordant to this image. Even though the job is a desk job (sitting in a cubicle), Fred wants to fire Olga. What should Fred do? The rational goodwill

7 For a more complete survey see my monographs: Michael Boylan, *A Just Society* (New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), and *Natural Human Rights: A Theory* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

(as Fred, himself, has developed it via maxim alpha) says that Fred should carry through with his promise to Olga since there is no conflicting moral issue that would invoke the *ceteris paribus* clause in the maxim. For Fred to act otherwise would be an instance of denying completeness based upon the rational goodwill. Fred should keep his promise to Olga and let her work for him.

Another sort of goodwill is the *affective* or *emotional goodwill*. We are more than just rational machines. We have an affective nature, too. Our feelings are important, but just as was the case with reason, some guidelines are in order. For the emotional goodwill we begin with sympathy. Sympathy will be taken to be the emotional connection that one forms with other humans. This emotional connection must be one in which the parties are considered to be on a level basis. The sort of emotional connection I am talking about is open and between equals. It is not that of a superior "feeling sorry" for an inferior. Those who engage in interactive human sympathy that is open and level will respond to another with care. Care is an action-guiding response that gives moral motivation to assisting another in need. Together sympathy, openness, and care constitute love.

In the above case on promise-making Fred wouldn't be about making and justifying moral maxims such as maxim-alpha. Instead, Fred would be developing his capacity sympathetically to connect with other people – call this maxim-beta. If Fred sympathetically connected with Olga as a person and her capabilities as a job applicant that met the functions required in the job, then her disability has nothing to do with her qualifications to carry out the job as advertised. His caring response would guide him toward maintaining his promise to Olga because to do otherwise would sever the sympathetic connection. Fred would not be acting like a loving person to do otherwise. The shared community worldview of *vibrant*, *athletic*, and *potent* need not be compromised because these are basically characteristics of the human spirit and not of the physical body. Olga can do her desk job with *joie de vivre* that reflects the company's shared community worldview. Thus, Fred acting on maxim-beta should refrain from firing Olga.

Thus, the two sorts of goodwill (affective and rational – set out via maxims alpha and beta) work together to promote keeping Olga on the job so long as she can do the work – disability should not be a factor here.[8]

When confronted with any novel situation one should utilize the two dimensions of the goodwill to generate a response. Because these two orientations act differently it is possible that they may contradict each other. When this is the

8 Since the affective goodwill comes from the completeness condition of the Personal Worldview Imperative, the conditions of the imperative also apply to this sort of philosophical love that I have set out. Some detractors think that you cannot order love (as I have done). I give a response to this argument in Michael Boylan, "Duties to children," in *The Morality and Global Justice Reader*, ed. Michael Boylan (Boulder: Westview, 2011, rpt. Routledge, 2019), 385–404.

case, I would allot the tiebreaker to reason. Others demur.[9] Each reader should consider their own response to such an occurrence.

A second part of the personal worldview imperative is *coherence.* People should have coherent worldviews. This also has two varieties: deductive and inductive. Deductive coherence speaks to our not having overt contradictions in our worldview. An example of an overt contradiction in one's worldview would be for Sasha to tell her friend Sharad that she has no prejudice against Latinos and yet in another context she tells jokes about Latinos. The coherence provision of the personal worldview imperative says that you shouldn't change who you are and what you stand for depending upon the context in which you happen to be: you should either support people with disabilities or excoriate them – waffling between the two is incoherent.

Inductive coherence is different. It is about adopting different life strategies that work against each other. In inductive logic a conflicting strategy is called a sure-loss contract.[10] For example, if a person wanted to be a devoted husband and family man and yet also engaged in extramarital affairs, he would involve himself in inductive incoherence. The very traits that make him a good family man – loyalty, keeping your word, sincere interest in the well-being of others – would hurt one in being a philanderer, which requires selfish manipulation of others for one's own pleasure. The good family man will be a bad philanderer and vice versa. To try to do both well involves a sure-loss contract. Such an individual will fail at both. This is what inductive incoherence means. From the point of view of a disabled person this second form of coherence involves a self-assessment of what can and cannot be done: to seek for both will lead to a sure-loss contract. This creates a reality of the possible in which the disabled person can try to find self-fulfillment (see below under health).

Third is *connection to a theory of the good – most prominent being ethics.*[11] The personal worldview imperative enjoins that we consider and adopt an ethical theory.[12] It does not give us direction, as such, to which theory to choose except that the chosen theory must not violate any of the other three conditions (completeness, coherence, and practicability). What is demanded is that we connect to a theory of ethics and use it to guide our actions.

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9 This is particularly true of some feminist ethicists. See Rosemarie Tong, "A feminist personal worldview imperative," in *Morality and Justice: Reading Boylan's A Just Society,* ed. John-Stewart Gordon (Lanham and Oxford: Lexington/Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 29–38.

10 The phrase "sure loss contract" comes from the notion of betting houses. Say you were betting on the finals of the World Cup, Brazil vs. Germany. If you gave 5/1 positive odds for each team, then your betting house will go out of business. A positive assessment of one team requires a complementary negative assessment of the other: failure to observe this rule results in a sure loss contract.

11 Other aspects of the good can include commitments to aesthetics and to religion.

12 My take on the various real and anti-real theories is generally set out in my text, *Basic Ethics*, part 2.

The final criterion is *practicability*. It is important that the demands of ethics and social/political philosophy (including human rights) be doable and its goals be attainable. This is especially important to consider when one is not in the position of the *most advantaged*. To be most advantaged is to be in the groups in society that are afforded privilege. This generally means that they possess traits of the ruling group, including race, gender, religion, national origin, and the right mix of mental and physical capabilities. To be in this group is to be granted an undeserved benefit from the start.

Those who do not meet the criteria afforded by privilege are excluded from the most advantaged group. For example, one category that is not in the most advantaged genus is those with a disability. One must accept the body one is in at the moment and consider what is possible. This does not mean to "settle" for something less. But it also does not mean that one should hang upon scientifically unwarranted dreams of having one's disability reversed. A *utopian* command may have logically valid arguments behind it but also be existentially unsound – meaning that some of the premises in the action-guiding argument are untrue by virtue of their being unrealizable in practical terms. If, in a theory of global ethics, for example, we required that everyone in a rich country gave up three-quarters of their income so that they might support the legitimate plight of the poor, then this would be a utopian vision. Philosophers are all too often attracted to tidy, if perhaps radical, utopian visions. However, unless philosophers want to be marginalized, we must situate our prescriptions in terms that can actually be used by policymakers. Philosophers involved in human rights discourse must remember that these theories are to apply to real people living in the world. In taxation policy, for example, at some point – let's say at the point of a 50% income-tax rate – even the very wealthy among us will feel unjustly burdened and will rebel and refuse to comply with the policy. Thus, it is utopian to base a policy upon the expectation that the rich will submit to giving up 75% of their income. An *aspirational* goal (by contrast) is one that may be hard to reach but is at least possible to achieve (it does not violate principles of human nature or structural facts about the communities that inhabit the world). For the purposes of this text, the aspirational perspective will be chosen over the utopian.

The purview of the personal worldview imperative is the individual as she interacts with other individuals in the world. Each of us has to do as much as possible to take stock of who we are and what we realistically think we can and should be. Our personal consciousness is in our power to change. Though factors of environment and genetics are not to be dismissed, in the end it is the free operation of our will that allows us to confront the personal worldview imperative as a challenge for personal renewal. The acceptance of the personal worldview account means that it is in our power to create our ethical selves. This is the component of personal agency that drives my entire metaethical and normative ethical project.

The personal worldview imperative thus grounds my theory of personhood that is part of the foundation of natural human rights.

The Shared Community Worldview Imperatives

The community is a second important focus in our presentation of crucial first-order metaethical concepts. This sensibility requires that we understand that each person lives within a context. Sometimes, especially in the United States, there is a mythology that we live *all by ourselves* and that others are just meaningless noise. I have called this attitude about social interaction an egg-carton community.[13] In an egg carton no egg should touch another egg. The idea behind this is that when eggs touch other eggs, bad things happen!

Many people – especially in wealthy countries among the wealthy – hold this to be true. They adopt libertarian attitudes about others, that is, that only negative duties hold because each person is only responsible for himself and the direct harm he may have caused another. Such a position can be termed *the negative duty position.* In negative duties one is only responsible for rectifying harm that he, himself, has caused. If *he* didn't do the deed, then no obligation falls upon him.

Behind the libertarian worldview is the sensibility that the natural unit of existence is of an individual existing by himself. All social interactions are part of a non-essential environmental milieu in which we are placed – much like fish are placed in water. The water is an aspect of existence but only as a trivial background condition.

Against this position is the community perspective. It asserts that we are actual members of communities and these are essential factors that must be acknowledged. Now before going further, I should set out that just as there are extremists in the individual perspective, that there are extremists in the community perspectives. Some extreme communitarians believe that the community is *everything.* Some sociologists and anthropologists fit into this position.

I would suggest a stance that is mid-way between the extremes shown in Figure 1.1.

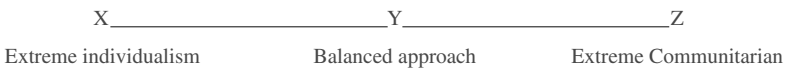

Figure 1.1 The ontological range of who we are.

Under my approach, both the individual, by herself, and the individual as a member of the community must be acknowledged. The Personal Worldview Imperative is my response to the former and the shared community worldview

13 Boylan, *A Just Society*, 115–116.

imperatives will be my response to the various social and natural contexts in which we live. Let us begin with the first of these: the shared community worldview imperative, "Each agent must contribute to a common body of knowledge that supports the creation of a shared community worldview (that is itself complete, coherent, and good) through which social institutions and their resulting policies might flourish within the constraints of the essential core commonly held values (ethics, aesthetics, and religion)."

There are four aspects of this imperative: (i) participation, (ii) common body of knowledge, (iii) creation of social institutions, and (iv) diversity. Let's address these in order. First is the requirement for *participation*. Communities only work well when everyone participates. Now the level of participation varies according to the community size. In micro communities (2–500) one may know most of the community members. Because of the small size, considerable involvement is necessary. For example, in a church pot-luck supper you may be required to make a dish and share with others. Or in a neighborhood "community watch program" in which neighborhoods that have high crime the residents take turns in *keeping an eye on the community.* These programs are very effective, but they require high participation among community members.

In macro communities (501+) one's participation is generally indirect. There are representatives of factions of the community and they solicit participation according to a hierarchical formation. In these instances, one may not see directly the outcomes of one's work, but it is asserted to be a cooperative effort on behalf of the whole. The metaphor of the beehive is often used here.

But in either case, *participation in the community* is necessary under this imperative. Those who do not participate are termed *free riders* who want reward for being in the community, but do not want to do their share. This is a metaphorical form of theft: you want to take without doing the work that is required of all. Whenever one *takes* without fulfilling the job description that is requisite (in this case being an active community member), one is involved in a form of theft.

The *common body of knowledge*. The common body of knowledge within a community is the generally regarded facts and values about what is true. There are, of course, many communities that set out various opinions about the facts of the world. For example, in the United States there are many who disagree with the almost unanimous opinion of scientists that world temperatures are rising and the cause of this is human activity (such as carbon emissions from motor cars, power plants, and manufacturing fabrication).[14] How can this controversy be resolved? It would seem to this author that there should be some commitment

14 For a lighthearted take on this serious problem see: Michael Mann and Tom Toles, *The Madhouse Effect: How Climate Change Denial Is Threatening Our Planet, Destroying Our Politics, and Driving Us Crazy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

to becoming aware of the science. If the science is set out in a too-complicated manner, then find a trusted party who can talk to the parties about this. The facts are the facts. We must not politicize them.

The *creation of social institutions*: societies depend upon institutions for their operation. These institutions may be formal or informal. Formal institutions are recognized by the society via some legal structure, such as licensing. There are many forms of license: incorporation, foundation status, non-profits, and so on. Penalties for non-compliance are within the legal system. Informal institutions are not recognized via the legal system but rather through social recognition. The penalties for non-compliance are outside the legal system and restricted to social sanctions (shunning and the like). The point to be made here is that all members of the community are responsible for monitoring their social institutions so that they fulfill a mission that does not violate that portion of the personal worldview imperative calling for "connection to the good." In the United States, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s sought to reform both the formal and informal institutions (*de jure* and *de facto*) that supported racist segregation. In this case members of the community came forward to reform institutions. This is what the shared community worldview imperative commands.

Diversity is a critical component in the shared community imperative. Because the imperative recognizes that there are at least three sources of community normativity (subject to conditions of the personal worldview imperative) there will be various expressions of what it means to be good among micro communities within the macro community. So long as these various expressions do not violate the personal worldview imperative, they are permitted. It is the position of this author that diversity breeds excellence. Communities that encourage diversity will outperform those who seek to suppress it. Throughout human history – all over the world – many to most macro communities do not embrace diversity but fall into xenophobic tribalism as they seek to disenfranchise *the other*. The shared community worldview imperative is a statement against the dream of homogeneity and a call for conscious heterogeneity.

Extended Community Worldview Imperative

"Each agent must educate himself as much as he is able about the peoples of the world – their access to the basic goods of agency, their essential commonly held cultural values, and their governmental and institutional structures – in order that he might individually and collectively accept the duties that ensue from those peoples' legitimate rights claims, and to act accordingly within what is aspirationally possible."

This form of the shared community worldview imperative extends to communities that are physically apart from the community in which one lives (either micro

or macro). It asserts a principle of cosmopolitanism. Now, the same individuals who demur about the provision of diversity within the shared community worldview imperative because of xenophobic tribalism will be leery of helping those who may be half-way around the world. But since the argument for the moral status of basic goods, below, makes no mention of being geographically close or within the same nation, this author is committed to the cosmopolitan position when it comes to providing others the basic goods of agency (see the table of embeddedness, below). Now it is difficult for many to feel committed to helping others who are geographically detached from us. These dynamics have been set out by Peter Unger.[15] My response has been to support Unger's aim that we should accept the positive duties that come from suffering peoples throughout the world.[16]

Eco-community Worldview Imperative

"Each agent must educate herself about the proximate natural world in which she lives relating to her agency within this eco-system: (i) what her natural place in this order is vis-à-vis her personal agency; (ii) how her natural place (vis-à-vis her personal agency) may have changed in recent history; (iii) how her social community's activities have altered the constitution of the natural order and how this has effected community agency; (iv) the short-term and long-term effects of those changes vis-à-vis agency; and (v) what needs to be done to maintain the natural order in the short and long term so that the ecosystem might remain vibrant." This imperative extends the way we think about community. In the first two community worldview imperatives the communities were human collections in contiguous micro and macro groupings and non-contiguous groupings. Now, we are asked to consider the natural world in which we live as being a part of our community consciousness. The emphasis is still upon agency. What this imperative sets out is that the natural element of our habitat is a vital consideration that should not be dismissed. Now at the writing of this book there are many who do not take their environment seriously. According to my take on things, they do not fully understand the role of nature in peoples' lives. If one lives in a place in the world in which hurricanes or torrential rains are a regular occurrence, then these peoples will not dispute the powerful role of nature. If one were living in the far north of Canada, which has just opened up the long-fabled *Northwest Passage* for passenger vessels and commercial vessels due to the melting of Arctic ice, then one would be forced to recognize the effects upon lives – especially those of the indigenous peoples of these regions. Now, it is often the case that those who live

15 Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chapters 1 and 2.

16 Michael Boylan, *Morality and Global Justice: Justifications and Applications* (Boulder: Westview, 2011), 25–27, cf. chapter 7.

in "climate-controlled luxury" might be numb to these realities, but they are there nonetheless. The eco-community worldview imperative speaks to the ecosystem in which one lives. But that's not all there is.

Extended Eco-community Worldview Imperative

"Each agent must educate herself about the world's biomes: freshwater, saltwater, arid regions, forests, prairies and grassland, tundra, and artic regions. This education should be ongoing and should include how the relative stability and natural sustainability is faring at various points in time. This knowledge will entail a factual valuing that also leads to an aesthetic valuing. Since all people seek to protect what they value, this extended community membership will ground a duty to protect the global biomes according to what is aspirationally possible."

To complete our embracing of the role of the natural world as a community in which we should show interest is the extended eco-community worldview imperative. This is parallel to the extended community worldview imperative. In each case, there is no immediate, proximate effect upon us. But if we have accepted our status as *citizens of the world*, then disruption of the climate *anywhere* is of concern to all of us *everywhere*. When there is a smog climate inversion over Shanghai, it should concern people of London, New York, and Berlin (among others). This is because of the principle of connectivity that underlies all of these community worldview imperatives.

The Argument for the Moral Status of Basic Goods

The opening sentence of my 2004 book, *A Just Society*, states: "All people by nature desire to be good." Just as in the opening statement of the *Nicomachean Ethics*,[17] there are two senses of good to be understood here. First there is the prudential sense of the word. "Good" here means "good for me." This sense advances my egoistic interests. Under this understanding of "good" it is almost tautological. Don't we all act to produce a result that we think is useful to us? Who (except for the masochistic) act to bring about pain? Even then, the pain might be pleasurable in some contorted way. But, unlike Aristotle, premise 1 slants away from the merely prudential. It includes the sense of some end of an action being *good* for my best interests. If one were an ethical egoist, as Plato was,[18] the two senses of

17 See the first of the nine sections of the Aristotelian primary text pieces.

18 The ethical egoist believes that acting ethically is really the path that is in our long-term best interests. This is the principal argument of the *Republic*: even if we possess the Ring of Gyges we should act ethically. It is in our long-term best interest.

"good" dissolve into one. My conjecture here is that all people want to act in order to fulfill what they think will be the best way for their life to follow. This leans toward Plato, here. If this is accepted, then the possibility of voluntary human action becomes a definition of our human nature. This argument tries to examine the conditions of such action with the understanding that what is most primary to action (embedded) is most choice worthy. This analysis follows from a generic understanding of *Homo sapiens*. Thus, it asserts general characteristics that will be applied later to individuals via the principle of logical application of a general covering law.

"The Moral Status of Basic Goods"

1. All people, by nature, desire to be good – Fundamental Assumption
2. In order to become good, one must be able to act – Fact
3. All people, by nature, desire to act – 1, 2
4. People value what is natural to them – Assertion
5. What people value they wish to protect – Assertion
6. All people wish to protect their ability to act – 3–5
7. Fundamental interpersonal "oughts" are expressed via our highest value systems: morality, aesthetics, and religion – Assertion
8. All people must agree, upon pain of logical contradiction, that what is natural and desirable to them individually is natural and desirable to everyone collectively and individually – Assertion
9. Everyone must seek personal protection for her own ability to act via morality, aesthetics, and religion – 6, 7
10. Everyone, upon pain of logical contradiction, must admit that all other humans will seek personal protection of his or her ability to act via morality, aesthetics, and religion – 8, 9
11. All people must agree, upon pain of logical contradiction, that since the attribution of the basic goods of agency are predicated generally, it is inconsistent to assert idiosyncratic preference – Fact
12. Goods that are claimed through generic predication apply equally to each agent and everyone has a stake in their protection – 10, 11
13. Rights and duties are correlative – Assertion
14. Everyone has at least a moral right to the basic goods of agency and others in the society have a duty to provide those goods to all – 12, 13

At this point the reader might ask what are the goods of agency, and what is their hierarchy in a triage understanding geared toward the possibility of human action toward what people believe to be in their long-term best interests? The answer to the question has several dimensions: biological, ethical, political, and economic. I have tried to address all of these concerns in a hierarchical setting of what goods allow us to act. The biological goods are necessary because without them we die

(or are severely compromised as biological beings) and cannot act. These are the level 1 basic goods. Because these goods affect the very possibility of biological agency, they are the most embedded.

Next are the liberty rights, education rights, and the protection of one's human dignity. These are also fundamental. However, they are not as fundamental as being able to biologically act. Thus, they are level 2 basic goods.

The secondary goods begin with goods associated with the shared community worldview at the micro and macro levels. These are very important: equal opportunity to participate in the community – even if one is *the other.* However, these goods are not as essential as the level 2 basic goods. It is at this point that governmental or institutional intervention can cease. Since level 2 and level 3 secondary goods are about economic achievement given a fair playing field, it is up to the agent here to fulfill what he or she is capable of and relative to their abilities (given environmental conditions) and their work ethic.

What follows is the Table of Embeddedness that sets out the triage of goods necessary for action (which is who we are: our human nature).

The Table of Embeddedness

Basic Goods

Level 1*: Most Deeply Embedded* (that which is absolutely necessary for human action): food, water (including sanitation), clothing, shelter, protection from unwarranted bodily harm (including basic health care)

Level 2: *Deeply Embedded* (that which is necessary for effective basic action within any given society)

- Literacy in the language of the country
- Basic mathematical skills
- Other fundamental skills necessary to be an effective agent in that country, e.g. in the United States some computer literacy is necessary
- Some familiarity with the culture and history of the country in which one lives
- The assurance that those you interact with are not lying to promote their own interests
- The assurance that those you interact with will recognize your human dignity (as per above) and not exploit you as a means only
- Basic human rights such as those listed in the US Bill of Rights and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Secondary Goods

Level 1: *Life Enhancing,* medium to high-medium on embeddedness

- Basic societal respect
- Equal opportunity to compete for the prudential goods of society
- Ability to pursue a life plan according to the Personal Worldview Imperative
- Ability to participate equally as an agent in the Shared Community Worldview Imperative

Level 2: *Useful*, medium to low medium embeddedness

- Ability to utilize one's real and portable property in the manner one chooses
- Ability to gain from and exploit the consequences of one's labor regardless of starting point
- Ability to pursue goods that are generally owned by most citizens, e.g. in the United States today a telephone, television, and automobile would fit into this class

Level 3: *Luxurious*, low embeddedness

- Ability to pursue goods that are pleasant even though they are far removed from action and from the expectations of most citizens within a given country, e.g. in the United States today a European vacation would fit into this class
- Ability to exert one's will so that one might extract a disproportionate share of *successful purposive agent.* From my perspective this is a firm statement of human nature: *We all desire to be able purposively to act toward ends that we believe to be good*

If we accept the argument for the moral status of basic goods and the assessment of what these goods might be (the Table of Embeddedness) then there is a proven positive duty by everyone to provide these goods to those without.[19] For example, take food. The United Nations has set out that the minimum calorie intake on a regular basis is 500 (given some variation for soma type).[20] Seven hundred and fifty calories is better and 1000 calories is the aspirational goal. These nutritional needs allow the brain to operate in such a way that purposive action (toward that which we consider to be good) is possible.

There are many reasons why some individuals may not be successful at garnering level 1 and level 2 basic goods, and level 1 secondary goods. These generally

19 Levels 2 and 3 of secondary goods are to be considered after the more embedded levels have been realized.

20 UNDP, *The 2007 Human Development Report* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2007), 27.

include socioeconomic deprivation that describes one's position in the community such that one's ability to commit purposive action toward one's conception of the good is restricted. One may be born into this state or descend there due to factors both in and not within one's power. This chapter will understand the word *disability* to refer to just such a state in which one does not have the positive liberty (or faces a negative liberty road block) to be able effectively to seek after these goods.

Positive liberty will be taken to be the power one possesses to be able to effect purposive action that leads toward the ends that one believes are good (both prudentially and morally). The power is demonstrated in the activity of the agent as she seeks to move in the direction of realizing the desired end.[21]

Negative liberty will be taken to refer to barriers from either within the agent or without that prevents the agent from fulfilling what he desires to do. Examples of "within the agent" include physiological impairments (either mental, emotional, or in the operation of one's muscular/skeletal system and its support systems[22]). Examples of "without" include environmental restraints either natural or social/political. For example, if one were born with the ability to concentrate for a long period of time before acting, this might be an advantage if one were born into a hunting society where one had to have the patience to wait for game before making one's move. However, if one were a Wall Street broker that same characteristic would mean that you would be always short on the one critical trade for your clients. Is being deliberate and patient, by nature, an advantage or a disability? It all depends upon the environment and whether it rewards or creates barriers for action.

Conclusion

These metaethical principles are useful in offering an evaluative structure by which to assess actions that take place within stories. When using an ethical perspective, one views the story as if it were a case study to prompt ethical discussion. Of course, the manner of the discussion will vary according to the ethical theory chosen. Since my theory is based upon a human rights and justice perspective it will steer one in a particular direction. Were someone to choose virtue ethics, deontology, or a utilitarian perspective, the discussion would be different.

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21 Many of the key distinctions I draw on liberty can be found in Isiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

22 By support systems, I am referring to the major systems of the body such as the circulatory, nervous, and digestive systems. These systems allow the conditions for voluntary positive liberty.

This is just one more way the "literature as philosophy" approach differs from the way literature is read in English departments: the case-study perspective (philosophers) allows one to speculate about changing the plot sequence or the construction of characters to see how the theme as expressed might also change. Since the point is conveying a particular point of view and a judgment on the same, the entire process leading up to it is fair game. In English departments the text is sacrosanct because the endgame is not engaging with the theme as set out, but rather the proper appreciation of the presented artifact to understand how it works on its own terms according to doctrinal interpretative theories such as cultural studies, deconstruction and post-structuralism, feminist theory, formalism, queer theory, Marxism, New Historicism, phenomenology and hermeneutics, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, reader-response theory, and structuralism and semiotics.[23]

My point in this book has not been to debunk the traditional paradigm but instead to offer another approach to some stories/novels which seem to be about engaging with the traditional truths explored by philosophy: logic, ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

This introduction is meant to emphasize ethics both because it is one of this author's research interests and because it is the one branch of philosophy that is most generally applicable to literature that aspires *to be* philosophy.

Exercises

1. Of the four parts to the Personal Worldview Imperative, which do you think is the weightiest as first-order metaethical principle and why?
2. How does one change the common body of knowledge in the shared community worldview? Can you think of any examples that follow the pattern you mentioned in the first part to this question?
3. Is there an inherent tension between the Personal Worldview Imperative and the Shared Community Imperative? In cases of conflict between the two, which should predominate?
4. Which occur most often in life: restrictions on positive liberty or negative liberty? Is one more important than the other?

23 This list is not meant to be complete but a representative sampling of the more popular theories used in the traditional paradigm.