

Examining the Origin of Morality

Ethics refers to the quality of one's inner character or moral philosophy.

Morals refer more to the outward actions of one's behavior.

Jesus made a distinction between the two when He often criticized people who outwardly behaved well but were inwardly corrupt.

How do you know if your morals are right or wrong?

Where did ethics, values or principles from which you live by, come from?

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What is Metaethics?

Evaluating these questions takes us into the world of **Metaethics**, a branch of ethics focused on three areas:

The origin of ethics.

Do ethical principles have an objective foundation or basis on human convention? Since ethics is not a physical truth such as a rock, is it a transcendent truth from god or man? Is it a social invention or expression of individual emotion?

The standard by which ethics is determined.

What does the term "good" mean? How does one describe a transcendent truth in a manner that can be logically accepted as a prescription for ethical behavior?

The psychological motive for ethical behavior.

What motivates humans to be moral? What is wisdom? Are motives rational or merely emotional? How does selfishness, pleasure, and altruism fit in?

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Objective or Subjective

When studying the origin of ethics, there are **three approaches** to this question:

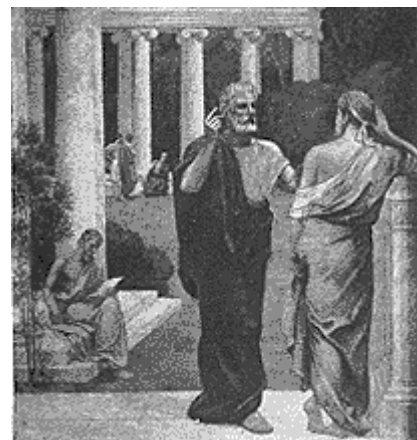
1. Like mathematics, ethics originated from the abstract world where concepts are materially not tangible but whose laws are timeless, never changing, and universal.

Ethics arising as mysterious transcendental moral facts, in this instance, are *objective* and *independent* of man.

2. As exemplified by the Genesis story, ethics originated from a god who willed moral values into existence.

Humans become aware of them through moral intuition and scriptural commands.

Ethics arising from a mysterious power from which transcendental moral facts were created, in this instance, are *objective* and *independent* of man.



Objective or Subjective (continues)

3. Based on social approval of each culture, ethics was determined by man using human logic and reason.

Ethics arising from culture, in this instance, are subjective to man and are not objective.

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Evolutionary Ethics

Some say that through natural selection, human nature developed a moral sense, a disposition to be good. If true, morality could be understood as a result of evolution not the result of:

- 1) divine revelation or
- 2) possibly human reason or will.



Evolutionary Ethics is based on a naturalistic philosophy, which seeks to explain how moral traits and behavior evolved.

The theory's objective is to demonstrate how moral values developed, and how they confer a selective advantage for the survival of human beings.



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Evolutionary Theories

For the Evolutionary Ethics to be acceptable for valid theory, it must answer two essential questions:

- 1) how does man distinguish between good and evil, and
- 2) why should man be good?

The proposals from evolutionary ethicists fall into 4 groups:

1. Human Evolution: natural selection of human behavior.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) was the first to consider an evolutionary basis for moral development. When Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species* (1859), he withheld his thoughts on the origins of human morality and consciousness.

2. Social Evolution: evolution of society and its values.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) coined the phrase "Social Darwinism" and developed Darwin's theory further. He felt that humans were motivated wholly by pleasure and avoiding pain, but he sought to find a balance between altruism and egotism. He theorized that humans derived pleasure from three types of "good" moral behavior by: 1) satisfying himself, 2) satisfying others, and 3) cooperation in satisfying everyone.

3. Sociobiology: evolution of the biological basis for ethics and social behavior.

Edward Wilson, a Harvard entomologist, coined the term "Sociobiology." The discipline of Sociobiology believes that there is a biological basis that explains ethics and social behavior. This is a shift from traditional evolutionary ethics; instead of developing an ethical system based on evolution, sociobiologists strive to explain ethics in biological terms.

4. Meme Theory: evolution of culture.

Richard Dawkins, an Oxford zoologist, coined the term "meme." In general terms, a meme is a basic unit of intellectual or cultural information that is passed from mind to mind; it is an idea that is attractive and embraced by other people. Conceptually based on the gene as the basic means of transmitting genetic information to successive generations, memes are like viruses that parasitize one's brain, alter one's behavior to believe the realism of the meme, and turn one into a host to propagate the meme.

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The Fallacies

But there are serious and perhaps fatal problems for the evolutionary basis of moral development.

The "Is - Ought" Fallacy

In his thesis, the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) reasoned that a moral "ought or ought not" cannot be derived from an "is" (what is - such as a biological or empirical fact). This became known as the Is – Ought Fallacy.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

The biggest problem for the natural or evolutionary basis for ethics is the Naturalistic Fallacy, which is like the Is - Ought Fallacy. In his study of the term "good," the British philosopher G.E. Moore (1873-1958) found that it was a term that was incapable of definition; the term "good" was too basic to define with simpler terms.

In attempting to connect ethics with evolution, evolutionary ethics commit a logical error when they attempt to define the term "good."

The Paradox of Altruism

Another problem facing Evolutionary Ethics is the paradox of altruism. The theory of evolution is based on natural selection of individuals, the process in which the fittest organism survives and reproduces. If given a choice, an organism would not sacrifice itself for another; thus, true altruism, altruism beyond reciprocity or self-interest, is seemingly contradictory. If humans did evolve by individual natural selection, then humans could not possibly have true altruism, as this trait would have been selected out.

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Naturalism's Challenge

While the traditional theories of Evolutionary Ethics has been largely discarded, the evolutionary basis of morality is still being developed along the lines of Sociobiology and Meme Theory.

Recognizing the challenges to the validity of their work, evolution theorists have embarked on combining complementary aspects of both theories.

However, both Sociobiology and Meme Theory have significant problems.

In any event, evolutionary ethics will continue in its attempts to establish the premise that morality could be understood as a result of evolution and definitely not the result of divine revelation.

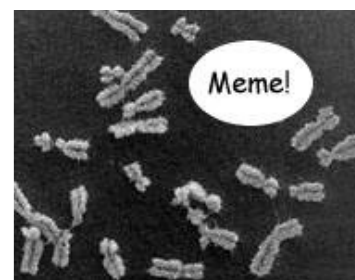
And the challenge remains:

- 1) how does man distinguish between good and evil, and
- 2) why should man be good?

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fal • la • cy (fă' ə -sē)

1. A false notion.
2. Statement or an argument based on false or invalid inference.
3. Error of reasoning.



Questions of Normative Ethics

What makes something good or bad?

Are moral values objective or subjective?

What is normal?



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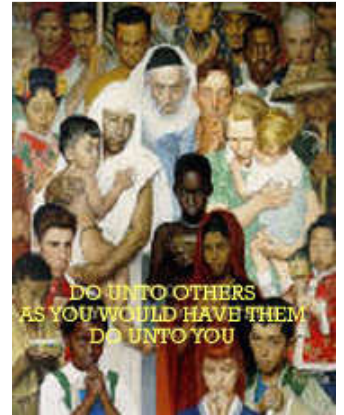
Normative Ethics

Normative ethics is the practical branch of ethics involved with establishing moral standards which determine right and wrong behavior; it is concerned with what we 'ought' to do.

The Golden Rule found in Matthew 7:12 is an example of this, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Providing us with guidelines for making decisions in the future, these theories also serve as means to evaluate decisions made in our past.

Each normative ethical theory has its own philosophical justification. And both advocates and critics argue the merits of each other's theories, which ultimately reflect their philosophical world-view.



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Tradition

Up until the 1800s, moral principles were traditionally associated with the existence of God. This foundation provided:

- a) the basis for objective moral values,
- b) the basis for objective moral duties, and
- c) the basis for moral accountability.

This foundation seemed to reflect the absolute and eternal aspects of moral principles.



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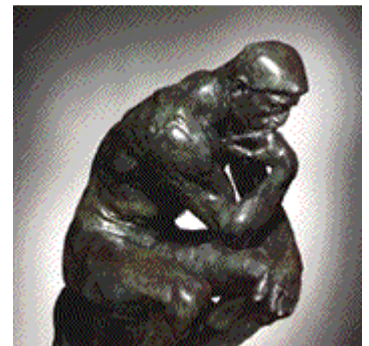
Secular Humanism

However, today there are many who take exception to this view.

They do not believe that God exists or that human beings were created.

They do not believe that all human beings share the same nature or same moral sense of what is right or wrong

Some say that a moral principle without God is not only good enough, but better than a moral principle based on God.



Secular Humanism (continues)

They believe that man is capable of being the source of moral principles. With the hindsight of history, man can determine a set of ethical principles reflecting the collective wisdom of humanity.

These values would be principles that could be stated and understood and from which judgments can be made.

In short, an ethical standard can be based on a scientific and naturalistic view of man and a rational knowledge of good and evil.

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Consequentialism

But how does one determine an ethical standard?

From the perspective of human reason and will, the test of a moral value was by its consequence, and moral values became rules of behavior after a long time of trial and error.

For example, the moral value of personal integrity instilled trust and promoted cooperation which was beneficial to the survival of the individual and group.

Whereas murder caused distrust and inspired retribution, a moral value which was adverse to the survival of an individual and group.



Thus personal integrity was a valued ethic. This method of reasoning what is morally right or wrong is called Consequentialism.

Consequentialism theorizes that humans reason what is morally right if the consequences of a behavior is more favorable than unfavorable; only the end result justifies the means.

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Non-Consequentialism

In addition to Consequentialism, there are other methods to determine if an action is morally right which are called Non-Consequentialist Theories.

In contrast to the consideration of consequences or outcomes of an action, these ethical theories are based on some higher moral standard that is placed upon them.

These theories rely less on human reason and are more intuitively difficult to understand how morality originated from a naturalistic perspective.



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Normative Ethics

Humanism's Quandary

So with normative ethics, one is left with a quandary.

Is there an objective and positive human basis for ethical conduct or is there an objective and positive God basis for ethical conduct?

Normative ethics can be human based and objective, but the naturalistic approach fails to explain how it originated or why man should be good.

Normative ethics can be God based and objective, but the theistic approach requires acceptance that God exists.



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Relative Ethics

Relative Ethics

Relative Ethics: Questions Are there any ethical values that are independent of cultural, social, and generational backgrounds?

Does this mean that a multicultural world with diverse needs cannot have any absolute ethical values?

Some will say that moral values can be objective but they cannot be absolute or applied universally across all cultures or circumstances.

Some call this *objective relativism* or state that moral values can be both objective and subjective.

Many prefer this, because they believe absolute moral values deprives them of the use of individual reason, judgment, and autonomy.



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Objective Values

Take a moment to consider the moral values of:

telling the truth which reflects one's personal integrity, or

dependability which reflects one's trustworthiness, or

good will which reflects one's benevolence, or

justice which reflects one's fairness.

These values are found in many cultures; however, no one wants to say that they should be absolute. Instead people wish that these moral values were universal.

Why?

Many prefer to keep these values relative to the individual, community, and culture lest they be seen as intolerant or prescriptive or closed to the possibility of the moral standard evolving.



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Relative Ethics

Implications What are the implications of a relative moral standard?

Any moral statement of what is right or wrong implies the existence of a legitimate authority who has the power of setting the moral standard.

In a society of relative moral values,

each individual has the authority to set their own moral standard.



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Moral Responsibility

This may be fine for proclaiming liberties, but what about declaring moral responsibility? Who determines the limits of these liberties or imposes obligations?

For instance, how wide should pornography be distributed in the name of freedom of speech?

Or influencing government through lobbying verses bribery?

Or educating verses exploiting our children?



This is the problem. Since everyone can set their own moral standard, everyone can challenge the authority that is setting the standard.

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Human Authority

Many have attempted to establish an objective moral standard with a legitimate human derived authority.

For example, governments based on:
dictatorship,

sovereignty,

representation, or

utilitarianism,

have all attempted to establish or enforce a particular moral standard.

But they all have failed, because everyone can challenge the legitimacy of the authority; **they all are impeachable.**



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Relative Ethics

Nihilism

Without an unimpeachable legitimate authority, it is impossible to determine the standard of what is good or what is evil.

Nihilism, the absence of morals,

is the inevitable consequence of a society based on relative moral values.



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Divine Command

Divine Command: The Dilemma

Divine Command Theory is the class of metaethical theories that describe Christian ethics.

Socrates' well-known Euthyphro Dilemma is often used to refute Divine Command Theory. It poses a moral dilemma for Christianity. For the Christian, Socrates only needed to pose two questions:

Is an act good because God commands it?

If you said yes here, you would be in error.

Because God is sovereign and all-powerful, this implies that morality is subject to God's whim as He is capable of enforcing His commands. An act is good because God simply says so, not because it is inherently good; the difference between good and evil does not matter to God.

This view is in contrast to Christianity. Morality is not based on whim. God is not inconsistent, and He does not lie.

Or does God command an act because it's good?

If you said yes here, you would be in error.

This question implies that there is a moral law that is external to and higher than God. This means that God is not sovereign.

This view is in contrast to Christianity. There is nothing higher or above God.

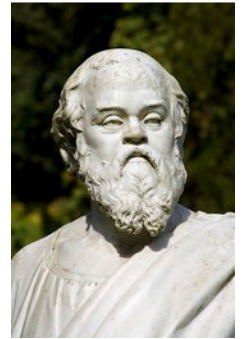
Thus, Christians are faced with two heretical options, either God is not good or God is not sovereign.

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The Solution

What is the solution to the apparent "dilemma" presented by Socrates' question? It is important to realize that the question assumes a distorted biblical view of God.



First, **there is an objective and absolute moral standard**, which denies the first option's suggestion that moral ethics are capricious and discretionary whims of God.

Second, **this objective and absolute moral standard is rooted and embedded internally in God**, which denies the second option's suggestion that the moral standard is external to and higher than God.

Morality is based on God's character and nature. The moral standard is neither above God nor merely willed by Him. With morality grounded in His holy and immutable character, the moral standard is fixed, absolute, and timeless.

If Gods says something is good, then it is good because it is intrinsically good.
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The Fallacy

What about the **Naturalistic Fallacy**? If God by nature is good, does the fallacy exist here? How does one understand the term "good?"



From the Christian perspective, the fallacy does not exist here. The term "good" is not defined, as it would be attempted in a philosophical theory.

When you consider the biblical evidence, mankind is given the moral intuition to know what goodness is; Paul tells us that God's moral law is written on our hearts (Rom 2:15).

It is because of this intuition that man can recognize morality and moral terms; this is what distinguishes human beings from other created animals.

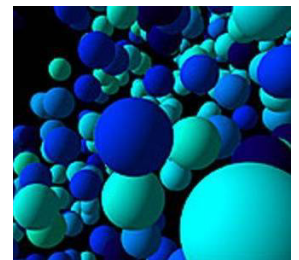
And this moral intuition is found in all human beings whether one is a Christian or not.
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The Revelation

Why is the existence of God necessary for morality?

Just as a computer cannot be programmed by chance, a human body, made up of atoms and subject to heredity, environment, and undesigned random chance, is nothing more than atoms and unintelligible.



Judgments of any type would have to be the result of non-rational forces not logical reasons.

Thus, without the existence of God, mankind would not be able to recognize and understand moral terms.

But because morality is based in God's character and nature, and man is a creation of God's, mankind recognizes and understands moral terms such as good and evil.

For the non-Christian, the existence of morality reveals the existence of God.

For Christians, the existence of morality confirms the existence of God.
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Conclusion

Origin

While ethics and morality reveal the existence of God, they do not prove the existence of God.

But the theistic basis of an objective and absolute moral standard does solve many of the problems facing current humanistic based ethical theories.

Christian Ethics explains the source and origin of morality.

1) How does man distinguish between good and evil?

Man knows how to distinguish between good and evil because of the moral awareness given to him as part of his human nature.

2) Why should man be good?

Man should be good in his efforts to strive for holiness before God.

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Justification

A supreme and unimpeachable authority

justifies Christian Ethics.

It is not justified by the human assessment

of short or long-term consequences.



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Absolute

Christian Ethics are:

objective,

absolute, and

transcends time and culture.



It is not objective relativism or denies the universal nature of morality.

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Revelation

Ethics and morality

reveal the existence of God.

Not just any god, but a true God

whose Canon (Bible) has withstood academic scrutiny.



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Validation

Christian Ethics is only valid when one accepts the divine inspiration and authority of God's Word.

When we accept the Word of God as **infallible and inerrant**,

then we have the logical grounds to make

God's oughts (Thou shalt) into our oughts (we should).

Without this belief, Christian Ethics is as capricious and relative

as any other ethical theory.



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