

II. Is there progress in ethics?

A prelude to ethical theory

A. Ethics as a branch of philosophy

Modern learning is marked by its extreme specialization. Universities have dozens of departments, each department having dozens of specialists presiding over their little piece of the knowledge puzzle. So who sees the big picture in the puzzle pieces? Traditionally, that task was both the honor and burden of philosophers. That view of philosophy has been succinctly expressed in Wilfred Sellars' oft-quoted remark that philosophy is that discipline that considers *how things* – in the broadest possible sense – *hang together* – in the broadest possible sense. Philosophy looks at the big picture. Kant made that task a little more specific, singling out three main concerns: what exists (ontology), what we know (epistemology), and how we should live (ethics). For philosophers, the word “should” is the key word for ethics. Asking what exists (ontology) and what we know (epistemology) sounds like the investigation of facts. But to refer to what we *should* do brings in a handful of conceptual baggage, including the consideration of alternative actions, and deliberation about which actions are *best* or *right*. When faced with an important decision, ethical philosophers want to know how best to decide. Ethical philosophy wants to be *decisive* for real life actions.

But what if ethical philosophy cannot be decisive?

Many students who approach philosophy are inspired by the challenge of tackling *the Big Picture*, which they hope will provide such stirring answers as “the Meaning of Life.” But they are sometimes also daunted to discover that today's philosophers are still debating many of the same questions that puzzled the Greeks 2500 years ago. Especially by comparison with modern science's progress, students wonder why philosophers don't also put old questions behind them with “best answers,” and get on with new questions. But despite philosophy's two millennial head start on modern science, modern ethical and moral philosophers have continued to disagree over even the most basic concepts.

B. The stand-off in 20th century ethical and moral philosophy

The failure of modern ethical philosophy to make the kind of progress found in modern science – where experts agree on the basic principles and disciplinary structure – is most clearly shown in a century-long debate between two contrasting approaches to ethics and morality. Those two approaches differ over whether the fundamental standard of ethics ought to be The Good or The Right.

- The philosophies oriented toward The Good are *consequentialist* theories: they say (1) that actions should be judged by the good or bad **consequences** they produce and (b) that the actions that produce the best consequences are the best actions. The most influential modern version of consequentialism is Utilitarianism, which aims at “the greatest good for the greatest number.”
- By contrast, some philosophers consider the concept of **obligation** to be the foundation of ethics, taking duties, rules, and rights to define the foundations of right action, leading to different conclusions from those who would maximize the Good. The (unfortunate) technical name for this approach is “deontology,” and it traditionally appealed to duties and moral rules as the ground of ethics, although modern versions find individual rights to be equally fundamental.

Our common use of ethical terms does not provide a consistent distinction between the Good and the Right. Common usage might even seem to undermine the distinction. After all, don't we often say that if we want to be happy, we *ought* to do what is best for ourselves, which suggests that we ought to do what achieves good results? And don't we also say that we ought to consider the feelings and welfare of others, which also might appear to boil duties and obligations down to seeking best consequences? Given these ways of speaking, might not the Good and the Right coincide in best actions, separated only by the use of two terms for one thing? [\[Note: the problem of ambiguity of terms\]](#)

Here the imprecision of our everyday ways of speaking hides some distinctions that philosophers believe must be made. The authority of goodness and the authority of rightness may coincide in many, if not most situations. But goodness and rightness may

also “come apart,” as philosophers say, under certain circumstances. Circumstances may arise where an action that is best from the point of view of happiness and welfare conflicts with the action that appears to be demanded by what is right according to duties and rules. A generation of philosophers and their students have spent much thought and spilled much ink over several notorious “hard cases” that suggest the possibility that maximum goodness and primary moral obligations sometimes point in different directions.

Let us consider the notorious trolley case:

A trolley’s brakes fail on a hill. The runaway trolley threatens to crash into a group of five people. You are standing by a switch that would reroute the trolley onto another track. But a child is playing on that other track. Should you sacrifice one life (the child’s) to save five (the group)?

Here we have what many see as a clear conflict between the Right (a strong duty: “Do not sacrifice innocent victims”: the child) and the ideal of maximizing the Good (maximize welfare by protecting the greatest number of people: save five people at the expense of one). Which principle of ethics should prevail, moral duty (do not harm innocents) or the maximum good (save five)? We will consider this debate in more detail later. But for now it suffices to note that underlying this problem is a choice between two theories of the nature of ethical authority (goods vs. duties/rules), a problem that is obscured by the fact that our language sometimes uses good-terms and right-terms interchangeably.

The trolley problem looks like a “tragic choice” situation where no outcome is pleasing. But it is hardly a common situation, and so may seem negligible. But this type of problem occurs in some common policy questions. Consider the death penalty and its most common arguments on both sides:

- **Pro:** Too many hardened criminals get put out on the street to do even more damage to innocent victims. Even if they get locked up, it costs society enormously to support them. Either way, the death penalty spares innocent victims either the violence or the cost of hardened criminals.

- **Con:** DNA testing has shown that some innocent people get put on death row. We should not be sacrificing innocent people to get at the hardened criminals.

To some people, this issue seems like a “tough on crime” situations, with some people being tougher than their critics. But it also represents two ways of deciding the issue. The Pro side argues that toughness on crime is *better* for society overall. The Con side argues that we don’t have the right to sacrifice innocent victims of the justice system in the interest of being tough on crime. Better consequences (less criminal damage) vs. inviolable duties (don’t sacrifice innocents).

The crux of the trolley problem is not simply that ethics/morality considers two different kinds of values (goods/duties). The deeper problem is how to reconcile them or at least decide between them. If our intuitions divide in such cases, then it is not clear whether the ground of ethics (the deciding factor) is the maximum good or our obligation to follow strictly our most basic moral rules. It seems like one ought to be the ultimate foundation of right action. In short, such hard cases show that we may not be clear just what the ultimate point of ethics is, or at least not clear enough to get everyone to agree. Of course, we expect persons from different cultures to have different intuitions about right and wrong on the details of life. But hard cases tend to split everyone’s most basic intuitions between conflicting forms of ethical authority, not between cultures, but within the same culture, or even within the same head. It is not a question of moral consistency across cultures; it is a question of consistency within one’s own ethical sense.

These conflicts are not due to lack of expertise. Professional philosophers are equally divided about the foundations of ethics and morality. The result is that introductions to philosophical ethics philosophy cannot do what introductions to physics, chemistry and sociology can do: tell you the essence of what you are studying. Natural scientists may differ about fringe theories; but they tend to agree on basic principles. By contrast, some philosophers say that the ultimate, inviolable authority in ethics is goodness maximization; others say that the ultimate, inviolable authorities in moral philosophy are the ultimate rules and duties; still others (out of frustration with the first two groups) will say that the central interest of philosophical ethics is (or ought to be) the character traits a good person

should have. More skeptical philosophers will say that moral obligation for any given population is whatever that society says it is. There are arguments for all of these. No wonder students of ethical philosophy worry about best answers.

C. Philosophical ethics as an essentially conflicted terrain

It would be easy to think of ethics as a field in which, since ancient times, proponents of opposing views have been engaged in unending disputes without prospect of resolution. Peter Singer (1991)

The one thing philosophers of ethics can agree on is that there is no agreement on the fundamental nature of ethical authority. This fact may not immediately bring social chaos because the problem seldom emerges into everyday moral decisions. Foundational debates aside, common sense morality tends to keep people acting in rough harmony with each other. But just as natural scientists want to discover nature's underlying realities, so ethical philosophers want to discover the ultimate principles that will solve the toughest moral problems and provide the best guidance for a moral and just society. This becomes especially urgent when, as in the case of the death penalty, policy decisions have far-reaching consequences. (We will focus on political and economic policies in the later chapters.)

The problem of (lack of) progress in ethical philosophy has been a concern for quite awhile. H. A. Pritchard noted in 1912:

Probably to most students of Moral Philosophy there comes a time when they feel a vague sense of dissatisfaction with the whole subject. And the sense of dissatisfaction tends to grow rather than to diminish. It is not so much that the positions, and still more the arguments, of particular thinkers seem unconvincing, though this is true. It is rather that the aim of subject becomes increasingly obscure. "What," it is asked, "are we to learn by Moral Philosophy?" "What are books on Moral Philosophical really trying to show, and when their aim is clear, why are they so unconvincing and artificial?"ⁱ

Indeed, the problem is older than the 20th century's frustrations. David Hume expressed his own colorful view of the travails of philosophical theory back in the 18th century:

Nor is there requir'd such profound knowledge to discover the present imperfect condition of the [philosophical] sciences, but even the rabble without doors may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision. Disputes are multiply'd, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are manag'd with the greatest warmth, as if every thing was certain. Amidst all this bustle 'tis not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favourable colours. The victory is not gain'd by the men at arms, who manage the pike and the sword, but by the trumpeters, drummers and musicians of the army. (THN, Introduction, 3).

Why study ethics, indeed!

Seeking a deeper explanation for ethical dissent, Pritchard asks whether "the subject ... as usually understood, consists in the attempt to answer an improper question." Good point. When too many experts cannot agree on an answer, we are well advised to look hard at the question. But are the questions of ethical theory so ill advised? The stock and trade of ethical philosophy are questions such as "What is right action?"; "What is the good life?"; "What is virtue?"; and "What is duty?" It is hard to imagine how ethical philosophers could fail to ask them and still do their job. If there is something improper about modern ethical philosophy, it cannot be that the classic questions are wrong questions.

Still, Pritchard may be right that people have misunderstood both the nature of ethical questions and the sort of answers one can expect of them. That is, to understand the deep frustrations of ethical theory, we may need to step back a bit and ask what sort of activity ethical theory ought to be. To take this step is to turn from ethics as *normative theorizing* – i.e., asking what it is we should do case-by-case – and turn to **meta-ethical theory** – i.e., by

asking what sort of practice is involved in ethics and ethical thinking. How, for instance, is ethical theorizing different from scientific theorizing?

Yet, even if we want to think in general about ethical thinking, we cannot get away from the fact that ethical thinking is finally about **practical choices** about what to do, whether those choices be the arresting hard cases or ordinary decisions of the day.

Consider one common sort of difficult choice. Advancing one's career might require moving to a new location though that might be disruptive to family life. Thus, careerism and family solidarity may conflict and some priority must be decided upon. Other ethical problems concern not ends (career or family), but of means. If one runs a small business, one might face choices between (a) perfecting one's current operations, (b) exploiting new opportunities that might be risky, or perhaps even (c) skirting the law and paying fines as a cost of doing business (common practice in large corporations). Commercial success is the goal in each case, but which path is best may not be obvious. That is why there are management consultants. In any given situation, one can ask not only what the *right goal* is, but *how best to achieve it* as well. The study of ethical decision-making faced with real problems is **practical ethics** or **practical reasoning**, whose immediate aim is right action faced with a particular problem. Meta-ethics just looks more generally about the kinds of factors that go into practical ethics and practical reasoning.

At the very least, then, ethics is about choosing or deciding how to act. One could say that ethics is about **the questionability of action choices**. Ethical philosophers would like to know if there is: (a) a best method for deciding; (b) an optimal list of priorities; (c) an understanding of practical reasoning that dissolves the problems; etc. So far, their answers have not yielded an ideal method, an ideal list of priorities, or an ideal understanding of ethics that dissolves the problems.

Pritchard suspects something wrong with the questions, but perhaps the problem lies in what philosophers (and everyone else) have expected by way of *answers*. Even if the classic ethical questions are the right questions, we may expect too much from our answers. Given life's inherent questionability, it may turn out that moral problems do not *get solved* in the way that scientific problems do. Answers in science and answers in ethics may play

different roles in our big pictures. Answers in science reveal what was previously unknown about the structure of reality. Answers in ethics must decide between possible actions whose consequences we may not know. We do well, therefore, to look at the difference between what counts as answers in the natural sciences and in ethical philosophy.

D. Theory as conceptual unity vs. theory as conceptual pluralism

The heart of the modern scientific worldview is a model of how the natural world works: What is the best model of deep space? How does the immune system work? Scientific questions arise when we find gaps in our current models: we have a natural scientific question when, having a model of how nature works, predictions based on that model turn out wrong. When we discover a gap between models and evidence, scientific theory tries to close the gap by discovering previously hidden relationships between nature's elements. They search for a new theory or better model that makes the problem go away. The new theory that yields the most coherent picture is inferred true as the best explanation (abduction). For centuries, the geocentric model of the solar system made the best predictions of star-movements; since then, the heliocentric model has done better. It is more consistent with the evidence. By revealing previously mysterious causal relationships between natural things, a scientific answer "solves" the problem posed by its question, and the question is forgotten. As science solves problems, it makes progress (subject to revision as new data is discovered). The more coherent the resulting picture, the stronger the case for the new theory, the more consensus about best answers among scientists.

So successful has modern science been at building a credible model of nature that all the major scientific disciplines can roughly fit together in a single scheme of the material world, building the model up from the elements of physics to the complex systems of human sociology. Indeed, that explanatory structure of natural and human sciences offers a key into the nature of modern scientific explanation. Within that structure, physics is the foundation for chemistry, chemistry the foundation for biology, biology the foundation for psychology and sociology. In such a scheme, the notion of "a foundation" for explanation is robust and relatively clear: the foundation provides them most basic elements.

With the modern sciences in mind, ethical theorists might well have thought that their task ought to be much simpler: simply organize all our concepts about how to live the best way possible, just as the natural sciences organize theirs. But where is the foundation? It is clear from the perennial debates about ethical theory that most theorists have assumed that one theory of ethical authority or another (e.g., goods vs duties vs virtues) must be the correct foundational theory, and the others derivative: maximum good deriving from virtue theory, or virtue theory deriving from duty theory, or duty theory deriving from maximum good theory. On the other hand, it may be just this assumption that is the problem with ethical philosophy. Perhaps the field of ethics cannot be reduced to one kind of principle, one ultimate field of moral authority.

What if the questionability of life were such as to *disallow* reducing right action to one ultimate principle? Against that assumption, some ethical theorists have argued for a deep **foundational pluralism** of ethical principles, in which case conflicts between those principles would be irreducible and thus inevitable. In that case, the task of ethical theory would not be the discovery of a single, ultimate foundational principle, but rather the discovery of *the fundamental structure of ethical conflicts*. If ethical theory cannot reduce all goods and duties to a single principle of right action, perhaps it can properly arrange an inherent pluralism of ethical elements and thus illuminate the true nature of ethical conflicts.

Those theorists who have insisted upon a plurality of basic ethical elements are the *ethical pluralists*. Eschewing the reductive ideal, pluralists theorize the inherent *disunity* of basic ethical and moral principles. As Charles Larmore has observed, “ethical theory in general and political theory in particular have been burdened, from their Greek beginnings through modern times, with unnecessarily simplistic notions of the overall order they can expect to discover.”ⁱⁱ [\[The fallacy of reduction\]](#) In the pluralists’ view, by contrast, theory cannot reduce all values to a single underlying ethical substance because values are irreducibly distinct and competitive, leading to fundamental conflicts. In 1891, William James wrote that

[none] of the measures [of goodness] that have been actually proposed has ... given general satisfaction (...) The various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful [assessment] scale. ("The ethical philosopher and the ethical life").

More recently John Kekes notes: "The basic belief that unites pluralists is that good lives require the realization of radically different types of values, both ethical and nonmoral, and that many of these values are conflicting and cannot be realized together."ⁱⁱⁱ In the pluralist view, life is burdened not only with *tragic choices* (choices with no satisfying outcome), but with choices that don't have an obvious right answer because there is no over-arching principle of rightness that can clearly defeat its alternatives rather than merely rivaling them.

The perennial conflicts among ethical theorists has led some philosophers to adopt an "anti-theory" position, dismissing the importance of systematic theory in favor of ethical judgment (eschewing philosophical ethics for practical ethics). According to anti-theorists, if there is no ultimate principle to sort out all ethical priorities in all contexts, one can only decide between conflicting principles and interests on a case-by-case basis *in context*. There is nothing useful to be said *in general*, which is the job of meta-ethical theory.

But contrary to this rejection of general theory in favor of practical judgments-in-context, one may still use the clarifying power of theory to more clearly define the conflicting elements of moral problems, the pluralism that gives rise to different kinds of choices. This is not inconsequential work: as we will see, some very general insights about right action can be drawn from such an analysis of basic questionability. Where anti-theorists typically assume that theory can *only* be useful if it reduces to an ultimate ethical principle, pluralists (such as James, W. D. Ross, Isaiah Berlin, Kekes, and Larmore) can theorize the diversity of ethical principles in illuminating ways, thus proving the usefulness of general theory, not merely for designing a scheme of elements, but even for deciding some issues and avoiding some confusions. If the pluralists are right, ethical philosophy ought to think of itself *not* as a science of answers, but rather as a science of questions, a science of ethical

questionability, in which case theory still has a robust role to play by investigating ethical questions in the most general terms possible, even if best answers are not *always* possible.

In this light, a pluralist theory of ethical foundations outlines the nature of **ethical questionability**: *Why do conflicts between principles arise? Why do some principles seem more appropriate in some contexts but not others? How do different principles fit into the overall scheme of ethical authority?* Etc. These general considerations prove useful not only for having the best theory of basic ethical ideas, which will clear up a number of basic confusions in ethical theory, but they also have practical implications that will affect decision-making in context.

In short, pluralist ethical theorists toe a fine line between (a) the ambitions of those reductive theorists who seek clearly best solutions to all ethical problems in terms of a single, ultimate principle of ethical authority, and (b) the pessimism of the anti-theorists who conclude that general theory is of little or no practical value for ethical problems. If the pluralists are right, ethical theory should abandon the ideal of theoretical reduction to an ultimate principle but *not* abandon the work of differentiating and properly arranging basic principles, the task of philosophical ethics.

E. The structure of normative (ethical) pluralism

The most compelling attractions of reductive ethical theory have been twofold: simplicity and security.

- Life would be much simpler if there were some ultimate criterion for determining right action. With that standard in hand, as Bentham put it, we could just take out our calculators and calculate the best course of action (according to his theory, the greatest good for the greatest number).
- The alternative can be daunting. Without a single clear standard of right and wrong, some have feared that morality would be vulnerable to the whims of custom, personal preference, ideology, and the struggle for power. Having the *true* standard of right action would allow one to cut through the pretenders to righteousness and

reveal the genuine article. Lacking such a principle, a pluralism of foundational elements lacks both the simplicity and the security of a single ultimate standard of right action.

Pluralists believe that while ethics and morality do not reduce to a single, decisive criterion of right action, the field of principles is not left in chaos. Let us call the field of ethical and moral principles ***the domain of normativity*** (including goods, virtues, moral rules, duties, obligations, principles of justice, etc.). Normativity includes all the values and commitments that impinge on our actions, including the consequences of our actions for others, the rules by which societies live together in harmony, and the consequences of thought and action for individual character and welfare. Once we give up the search for a single ultimate principle, the question for ethical philosophy concerns how much order and definition the domain of normativity can yield to critical reflection, and thus how useful philosophy can be, not only for understanding life's inherent questionability, but also for determining the good life and right action as well as can be done.

If foundational pluralism hopes to map the domain of normativity, it must discover the essential structure of normativity that gives rise to its fundamental elements. Such a structure would explain (a) the sources of ethical authority and (b) how conflicts between those sources arise. So we should ask: what are the basic kinds of choices that normativity requires? Between what *most basic interests* does normativity make us decide? Common sense tells us where to look first.

1. *Particular interests vs. collective interests.* Normativity forces us to balance the interests of the individual and of society as a whole. Individuals act to protect their own interests, yet they must serve the interests of their society as well. Sometimes, however, individual and community interests conflict as when soldiers are asked to risk their lives for their country, or when persons are expected to forego opportunities for lucrative crimes that they might very well get away with. Normally, "honesty is the best policy" because society provides incentives for cooperative behavior and disincentives for harmful behavior. But though cooperation is usually in everyone's interest, this normal coincidence of

personal and social interests cannot obscure the fact that individual and social interests may diverge, as when soldiers must sacrifice their lives for society's interests or when successful embezzlers are expected to turn themselves in. Dying for one's country may be honorable, but the dead are not around to enjoy the honors they receive in their absence. Thus ethics must begin with the tension between individual interests (personal goods) and society's interests (social goods). It is the basic social function of morality to reconcile these two sources of interest.

2. Another, equally fundamental distinction arises when we question the nature of normative authority itself. As modern ethics shows, practical reason is often divided between conceptions of the *good* and conceptions of the *right*, where goodness means all beneficial interests and where rightness means obligatory duties or rules. Not only can we easily see that goods and interests (e.g., pleasure, comfort) differ from rules, duties, and obligations (e.g., honor your parents, serve your country, tell the truth, etc.), but they too may conflict (truth telling may cause unhappiness, patriotism can be fatal, etc.). As we have already noted, the debate between good consequences and moral duty reveals different conceptions of what form of normativity is ultimate. Thus, normative pluralism must distinguish goods and rules as distinguishable and sometimes competing elements in ethical and moral thinking.

In sum, normative theory seems to be comprised of four basic orientations: toward individual and collective interests, and toward goods and rules as motives and constraints on moral choices. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the most fundamental questions about ethics and morality arise from the tensions between these elements, which can be schematically represented in the contrast between local and global perspectives, and between the authority of goods/consequences/ends and rules/duties/rights:

	LOCAL	GLOBAL
GOODS	my welfare	humanity's welfare
RULES	my society's rules	universal duties

This fourfold array of elements explains the basic structure of ethics as the study of existential decision-making. Individuals seek their own ends, but they do so within a social context in which others have claims on their actions (individual vs social goods). Moreover, individuals' considerations include not only benefits and costs, but rules imposed by society (laws), by the world (human rights), and even by practical reason itself (rules to weigh probabilities of success, to weigh costs of failure, to consider long-term as well as short-term results, etc.). Clearly, some rules are only local in their authority (drive on the right in the US, on the left in the UK), but others may be universal, as in the case of the principles of practical reason (do as little harm as possible). In short, these four aspects are the basic dimensions of the field of normativity.

This arrangement of elements allows us to address a semantic ambiguity about the words *ethics* and *morality*. In contemporary usage these terms are often interchangeable. Their places in the history of philosophy, however, reveal different origins and emphases. The Greek root of "ethics" echoes the Greek legacy with its orientation toward happiness and the good life. The Latinate root of "morality" is closer to the medieval and Kantian views in which duties and rules are primary. For clarity's sake I will generally honor that difference, identifying **ethical theory with the search for the good life** and **moral theory with the search for ultimate duties and rules**. Still, this distinction cannot be too tidy. There may be times when a standard usage – e.g., "moral psychology" – may use the adjective "moral" in a way that embraces the wider reach of "ethical," as when moral psychology typically includes matters of virtue and personal benefit that do not reduce to duties and rules. Thus there will likely remain some residual vagueness about the boundaries of "the ethical" and

“the moral” even if those terms can often enable us to refer to one form of normativity rather than the other. The ambiguity should not be too confusing.

The schematic nature of these four orientations explains why they inevitably give rise to the kinds of meta-ethical theories that are found in the history of ethical theory, not to mention the hard cases in which notions of the Good seem to conflict with notions of the Right. When the goals of the individual actor are considered primary, ethics takes the form traditionally associated with **virtue theories**, in which character becomes the focus of attention. When the greatest benefit to society is sought, the approach often resembles that of Utilitarianism (or **consequentialist** theories more generally). When duties are made most fundamental, moral theory is **deontological** (a related modern form of which is **rights** theories of justice). When local rules are considered primary, moral theory focuses on local customs and institutions. A brief survey of ethical debates shows that the most fundamentally conflicting views in ethics typically arise from clashes between these contrasting sources of ethical interest.

	LOCAL	GLOBAL
GOODS:	<i>virtue theories</i> <i>(personal ends)</i>	<i>utilitarian theories</i> <i>(aggregate welfare)</i>
RULES:	<i>conventional morality</i> <i>(local authority)</i>	<i>deontology/rights</i> <i>(universal duties)</i>

And finally, the fundamental character of these meta-ethical perspectives is also attested by the fact that they account for the distinct emphases of the most influential ethical theorists: Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Bentham, Mill, and Nietzsche.

	LOCAL	GLOBAL
GOODS:	Aristotle, Nietzsche	Bentham, Mill
	virtue theory	maximum good
RULES:	Hume	Kant
	social conventions	absolute duties

The point is not that these thinkers' theories coincide exactly with the essence of these perspectives. After all, they are all trying to explain the entire domain of normativity. Still, their theories clearly gravitate differently toward the characteristic emphases of these four perspectives. For our purposes, these thinkers reveal the salient characteristics of the most basic elements of normativity (which is why ethics textbooks typically use them that way). We will consider these thinkers insofar as each articulates the logic of his privileged perspective.

When normative pluralism is formulated in these terms, the inevitability of conflicting foundational theories becomes obvious. Consider the Involuntary Organ Donation hard case.

The homeless organ donor: A bus accident occurs in which five young people are injured. They are rushed to a hospital in dire need of various organ donations. A throng of concerned relatives gathers at the hospital to await the fate of their young family members. A doctor on duty notices that there is a homeless man in an adjoining room under sedation in preparation for an operation. In the course of processing him, the doctor learned that he has no family or friends to be his contacts. The doctor realizes that he can save five lives by sacrificing one, with the

further benefit of bringing relief to dozens of concerned friends and families of the young people. The homeless man would never know he had been sacrificed, nor would there be a throng of relatives to grieve over his passing. Should the doctor maximize happiness by sacrificing the homeless man?

People faced with this hard case immediately see the conflict between moral rules (the doctor's Hippocratic Oath: "First, do not harm") and the ideal of maximizing benefits (saving five lives at the expense of one). Here there seems to be a clear conflict between maximizing happiness and honoring basic rules: more people would be made happy by sacrificing the homeless man. But sacrificing an innocent man breaks a basic rule of morality and justice that most people are not willing to breach just to maximize happiness. Thus the two sources of normativity conflict (maximizing happiness vs. moral rules). Pluralism predicts that such conflicts are inevitable. Because normativity reduces to different kinds of elements rather than one ultimate element, they may (and will) conflict.

But the fourfold scheme explains more than the competition between foundational theories. By articulating the natural domains of the different kinds of elements, the scheme explains why the four meta-ethical perspectives are usually *complimentary* rather than competitive. After all, the aim of moral systems is to harmonize interests, and doing so does not normally involve life-wrenching conflicts of interest. Rather, in an enlightened culture all the elements of normativity would typically work together in complementary fashion: the cultivation of virtues would involve respecting local morality and the most basic duties, and thereby yield the greatest good for the greatest number. Normally, all claims are satisfied at once because, in principle and under normal circumstances, the four perspectives support each other. But because they are different perspectives, they can conflict in the kinds of circumstances that yield moral dilemmas and hard cases.

In sum, the fourfold division of normativity defines not only the limits of each perspective, but also the ideal function of each element. In that sense, a schematic pluralism is not merely negative – i.e. resisting theoretical reduction – but helps articulate the positive content of each perspective.

F. The goals of pluralist foundational analysis

This fourfold view of normativity promises several kinds of insight:

- The scheme explains why the reductive approach to ethics and morality has been futile ([the fallacy of reduction](#)): that approach attempts something that cannot be done, i.e., explain normativity as if it had only one origin of normative authority when in fact there are four origins. Foundational pluralism explains why so many capable minds, lured by the ideal of reductive simplicity, have failed to achieve the desired reduction.
- The scheme explains the origin of four major kinds of normativity by their orientation to different basic elements. By virtue of its structure, it explains where ethical interests come from and why all are fundamental to the larger concerns of normativity.
- The scheme explains how each of the four approaches constitutes a somewhat independent perspective on normativity: virtue theory reveals the interests of individuals through the lens of character development; local rules show the means by which societies achieve social coordination by regulating behavior in the particulars of their specific situations; universal duties show the kinds of rules that appear to be required by morality in general, thereby cutting across particular cultures and societies; and collective welfare aggregates everyone's benefits into a single unified goal for society as an organized whole.
- The scheme shows that, because each approach is fundamental in its way, it might be mistaken for an ultimate foundation, or at least a best starting point to explain normativity.
- Distinguishing the four domains shows (a) why under normal circumstances the four kinds of elements are complementary, (b) why occasions might arise where domains appear to conflict, and (c) why under normal circumstances one domain may have clear moral priority. E.g., choosing a career, one will consider one's own virtues and needs; when giving to charity, one will

consider the general welfare; when faced with conflicting obligations, one considers one's greater duty; when traveling, one defers to local customs; etc.).

In sum, this fourfold scheme of the most fundamental ethical perspectives sheds light on the nature of normativity and the relationships between its principal types.

For all this explanatory promise, however, it cannot be expected to dissolve all conflicts between elements, which proves impossible. Given the inherent questionability of life, the hardest cases can only show the irreducible pull between approaches. Such clarification leaves the conflicts of values in place, though better understood.

On the other hand, a proper conception of ultimate ethical elements suggests where elements normally have a natural privilege, which may suggest when conflicts between perspectives do admit of a superior resolution. Superior resolutions may be argued for insofar as one approach might typically be more relevant than another in a given type of situation, even if right action cannot *always* be determined.

ⁱ "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?"; anthologized in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*. Cahn and Markie (eds.), Oxford, 2006; 467.

ⁱⁱ P. *Patterns of Ethical Complexity*. Cambridge, 1987; ix.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Morality of Pluralism*.