Moral Skepticism

Each of us has our doubts about morality. Most of these reflect our occasional puzzlement about what's right and wrong—we aren't sure, for instance, whether it is ever okay to lie, or to break a deathbed promise.

But there is another kind of doubt, one that can undermine all of our confidence in morality. This sort of puzzlement is not about the content of morality—what it requires or allows—but about its status. The worry, specifically, is that moral skepticism—the denial of objective moral standards—is correct, and that morality therefore lacks any real authority.

The notion of objectivity, like so many others that we have seen in these pages, is ambiguous. Objective moral standards are those that apply to everyone, even if people don't believe that they do, even if people are indifferent to them, and even if obeying them fails to satisfy anyone's desires. Moral claims are objectively true whenever they accurately tell us what these objective moral standards are, or what they require of us.

There are millions of objective truths. Here are three, at random. The planet Jupiter has a greater mass than Mercury. John Milton wrote Paradise Lost. Galileo is dead. It doesn't matter what you think of these claims.

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1. The term moral skepticism sometimes refers to the view that gaining moral knowledge is impossible. (That's the way I used the term in chapter 16, for instance.) I am going to use the term here in a different way, noted above—namely, to refer to all theories that deny the existence of objective moral standards.

2. All terms and phrases that appear in boldface are defined in the Glossary at the end of the book.
and it doesn't matter what I think of them. It doesn't matter whether I care about these claims, and it doesn't matter whether believing them satisfies any of our desires. Neither personal opinion nor conventional wisdom makes these claims true. They are true and would remain true even if no one believed them.

But are there any objective moral truths? That's not so clear. There are plenty of reasons for doubt: the most popular and important of these will be the focus of our final chapter. If such doubts are correct, then ethical objectivism must be false. Ethical objectivism is the view that some moral standards are objectively correct and that some moral claims are objectively true.

Before having a look at these criticisms of ethical objectivism, let us consider the alternatives. This requires that we sort out the various forms that moral skepticism can take. (And it means just a little more jargon. I'm sorry.) There are basically two forms of moral skepticism: moral nihilism and ethical relativism.

Moral nihilism is the view that there are no moral truths at all. Taking a close, hard-nosed look at what is real and what isn't, nihilists place morality squarely in the latter camp. The world contains no moral features. Don't be fooled by our common talk of genocide's immorality or a murderer's evil nature. That sort of talk is either just plain false, or a disguised way of venting our feelings (of hatred, disgust, etc.)

According to the moral nihilist, when we take a step back from the issues that engage our emotions, we can see that nothing is right, and nothing wrong. The world will one day be fully described by science, and science has no need of moral categories. In the words of the brilliant Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76), we gild and stain a value-free world with our feelings and desires. When we declare a murderer wicked or a relief worker good and kind, we are expressing our anger or our admiration. We are not stating a fact. We couldn't be, since there is no moral reality to describe. As a result, no moral claims are true.

By contrast, ethical relativists claim that some moral rules really are correct, and that these determine which moral claims are true and which false. Many are true. People sometimes get it right in ethics, and they do that when their beliefs agree with the correct moral standards.

But these standards are never objectively correct. Rather, these standards are relative to each person or each society. A moral standard is correct just because a person, or a society, is deeply committed to it. That means that the standards that are appropriate for some people may not be appropriate for others. There are no objective, universal moral principles that form an eternal blueprint to guide us through life. Morality is a human construct—we make it up—and like the law, or like standards of taste, there is no uniquely correct set of rules to follow.

These two brands of moral skepticism are quite different from each other. It pays to treat them separately. We'll keep the focus on ethical relativism in this chapter, and turn to moral nihilism in the next.

Two Kinds of Ethical Relativism

As you may already have noticed, ethical relativism isn't just a single doctrine. It actually comes in two varieties: cultural relativism and individual relativism (usually referred to as ethical subjectivism, a name I'll use from now on). Cultural relativism claims that the correct moral standards are relative to cultures, or societies; ethical subjectivism claims that the correct moral standards are those endorsed by each individual. The difference amounts to whether society, or each person, has the final say about what is right and wrong. This is undoubtedly an important difference, but as we'll see, both the advantages and the drawbacks of cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism are remarkably similar.

Consider subjectivism first. It says that an act is morally acceptable just because (a) I approve of it, or (b) my commitments allow it. An action is wrong just because (a) I disapprove of it, or (b) my commitments forbid it. My commitments are the principles I support, the values I stand for. On this line of thinking, personal conviction is the ultimate measure of morality.

Subjectivists think that there are right answers in ethics, but that these are always relative to each person's values. There is no superior moral code that can measure the accuracy of each person's moral outlook. If subjectivism is correct, each person's moral standards are equally plausible.

Cultural relativism instead locates the ultimate standard of morality within each culture's commitments. It says that an act is morally acceptable just because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals.

Both subjectivists and relativists regard people as the authors of morality. On both of these views, morality is made by and for human beings. Before we were around, nothing was right and wrong. If our species ever becomes extinct, morality will cease to exist. The fundamental difference between these two views is whether each person, or each society, gets to have the final say in ethics.
Despite their disagreement about whose views are morally authorita­
tive, both ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism share a number of
features that make it easy to evaluate them together. Let's have a look.

Some Implications of Ethical Subjectivism
and Cultural Relativism

Moral Infallibility
Subjectivism and relativism occupy a middle ground between moral nihil­
ism and ethical objectivism. There are legitimate moral standards (con­
trary to nihilism), but their legitimacy depends crucially on our support
(contrary to objectivism).

But subjectivists and relativists do not always see eye to eye. Subjectiv­
ists are suspicious of cultural relativism because of their belief that societ­
ies can be deeply mistaken about what is right and wrong. If the core
principles of a social code can contain some serious moral errors, then
cultural relativism is in trouble, since it says that whatever society holds
most dear is morally right.

Relativists admit that some social beliefs can be morally mistaken.
These are the ones that clash with society's most cherished ideals. But if
relativists are right, those ideals can never be immoral, since they just are
the ultimate moral standards for each society.

The subjectivists seem to have a valid criticism here. The basic ideals
of some cultures do appear to be deeply mistaken. Consider the case of
Nuran Halitogullari, a 14-year-old girl from Istanbul who was abducted
on her way home from the supermarket. She was raped over the course
of six days and then rescued by police. After being reunited with her family,
her father decided that she had dishonored their family by having been
raped. He then exercised what he regarded as his rightful authority. As he
told a newspaper reporter, "I decided to kill her because our honor was
dirtied. I didn't listen to her pleas; I wrapped the wire around her neck and
pulled at it until she died." 3

Such “honor killings” usually go unpunished. That's because the cul­
tures in which they are committed often regard them as justified. In such
cultures, a family’s honor is often dependent on the “purity” of its women.
And this purity is measured in how its women dress, in who they have


relationships with, and in whether they have been victimized in various
ways. Thousands of girls and women over the past two decades alone have
been killed because they have worn “Western” clothes, have had premarit­
tal sex, have had a boyfriend of a different religion, or have been raped.

Such killings are supported by deep cultural assumptions—(i) that
men should have the power of life and death over women; (ii) that women
ought to obey their husbands, fathers, and brothers unconditionally; (iii)
that a man's feeling of shame is enough to justify killing the woman who
has made him feel that way.

These assumptions are found at the heart of many cultures. If ethical
relativism is correct, then men in those cultures may be morally required
to kill their wives, daughters, or sisters for having shown their bare calves,
having kissed the wrong man, or having been raped.

The extreme sexism at the heart of honor killings is but one of many
examples that raise doubts about cultural relativism. After all, societies are
sometimes based on principles of slavery, of warlike aggression, of reli­
gious bigotry or ethnic oppression. Cultural relativism would turn these
core ideals into iron-clad moral duties, making cooperation with slavery,
sexism, and racism the moral duty of all citizens of those societies. The
iconoclast—the person deeply opposed to conventional wisdom—would,
by definition, always be morally mistaken. This has struck many people as
seriously implausible.

Subjectivism faces a similar problem. The cultural relativist makes
societies morally infallible (incapable of error), at least with regard to their
foundational principles. Yet subjectivists make each person's basic com­
mitments morally infallible. True, subjectivism allows that people can make
moral mistakes, but only if they fail to realize what follows from their own
commitments. When it comes to the basic commitments themselves, sub­
jectivism denies that these can ever be false or immoral.

If morality is in the eye of the beholder, then everyone is seeing things
equally well. Millions of people have very sincerely endorsed programs of
ethnic cleansing, male domination, and chattel slavery. Subjectivism turns
these prejudices into moral truths.

Moral Equivalence
Subjectivists grant that your moral values, which very likely oppose the
ones just mentioned, are also correct. The biased and the bigoted have no
monopoly on the truth. Ethical subjectivism is a doctrine of moral equiva­
 lance; everyone’s basic moral views are as plausible as everyone else's. This
can sound liberating and tolerant, and can be put to good use in cutting arrogant people down to size. Such people usually claim to have found the Truth, and often think that they have a special license to force this Truth on others. If subjectivism is correct, the views of such zealots are no better than those of their intended victims.

But they are no worse, either. If ethical subjectivism is correct, then the moral outlooks of Hitler or Stalin are just as plausible as those of a Nobel Peace laureate. And, as we will see in the final chapter (have a look at argument 5, pp. 326-27), if all moral views are on a par with one another, then this is a threat to tolerance, rather than support for it. That's because those with intolerant outlooks would have a moral view as good as that of their opponents.

Cultural relativists fare a bit better here. They will deny that everyone's moral views are equally plausible. Some people are much wiser in moral matters than others, since some people are better attuned to what their society really stands for. But when it comes to evaluating the basic codes of each society, relativists must allow that every code is equally good. Since the ultimate moral standards are those endorsed by each society, none is better than any other. That may sound egalitarian and open-minded. But what it means in practice is that social codes that treat women or ethnic minorities as property are just as morally attractive as those that don't. That's not an easy thing to accept.

No Intrinsic Value

Here is an ancient moral question: is something good because we like it, or do we like things because they are good? Ethical subjectivism goes for the first option. There is nothing intrinsically good about promise keeping, generosity, kindness, or caring. Subjectivists think that these things are valuable, if they are, only because people approve of them. Were our tastes to change, the morality of such actions and character traits would change with them.

That might strike you as suspicious. If it does, then cultural relativism might seem a good alternative. On that view, moral standards do not depend on the possibly fickle choices of any single person.

Yet cultural relativism faces the same worry. For the relativist, the value of something depends entirely on whether a society's guiding ideals approve of it. When these ideals change, the moral code changes with them. If societies place no value on tolerance, or sexual equality, then in those societies such things have no moral value at all. An open, welcoming society that eventually became a fascist tyranny would not be falling into moral error. If relativism is true, then a society's basic moral ideals (no matter what they stand for) are correct. They are not correct because they measure up to some independent standard. They are correct because a society embraces them.

The problem with such a view is that the ultimate moral principles—whether fixed by each individual or by each society—can be based on prejudice, ignorance, superficial thinking, or brainwashing, and still be correct. According to both kinds of relativism, the origins of our basic moral beliefs are irrelevant. No matter how we came by them, the relativist claims that our ultimate moral beliefs cannot be mistaken.

Questioning Our Own Commitments

If subjectivism is correct, then I know what is right so long as I know what I approve of. That's because my approvals (according to subjectivism) are the ultimate test of morality. But what about the situations where I want to know whether my commitments are worthwhile? In these cases, I know what I like, but am still up in the air about its value.

This sort of puzzlement seems to make sense. I have been in such situations before, where I am unsure of whether I am right to like someone so much, or wrong to be so critical of some action. But if subjectivism is true, this cannot make sense, since my approvals and disapprovals are the ultimate test of right and wrong.

The same sort of problem faces cultural relativism. There is no room in this theory to second-guess the guiding ideals of one's own society, since (by definition) they are the correct moral standards of that society. And yet it seems to make sense to ask whether the basic principles of one's society are morally acceptable. If relativism is correct, however, such questioning shows that you don't really understand what morality is all about.

Moral Progress

It seems that both individuals and societies can make moral progress. We can do this when our actions become morally better than they used to be. But I am thinking here of progress in our moral beliefs. This occurs when more of them are true and, in particular, when our most fundamental beliefs change for the better.

The gradual reduction in racist and sexist attitudes in the United States seems to represent this sort of moral progress. The kind of repentant self-examination that German society undertook (and continues to
undertake) after World War II also seems a clear improvement over Nazi ideology. When I examine my own life, I see several moral views that I held when I was younger that I now regard as seriously mistaken. Maybe you do, too.

The problem for relativism and subjectivism is that it can’t make sense of the most basic kind of moral progress. If a person’s or a society’s deepest beliefs are true by definition, then they cannot change for the better. They can change, of course. But no such change would mark a moral improvement.

To measure moral progress, you need a standard. In ethics, that standard is the ultimate moral rule (or rules, if we are pluralists). If subjectivism is correct, that ultimate rule is personal opinion. If relativism is correct, that ultimate rule is given by a society’s basic ideals. These cannot be mistaken. If a society gradually eases out of its deeply sexist attitudes, for instance, that cannot be moral progress. That can only be a change to a different moral code. And if relativism is correct, different moral codes are not better or worse than one another. They are morally equivalent.

If subjectivism is correct, then inmates who experience a change of heart while in prison, who adopt new aims of charity and repentance, cannot be showing moral progress. If relativism is correct, then a society that rejects its earlier ideals of racial purity and genocide cannot be making moral progress. That is difficult to believe.

Ethical Subjectivism and the Problem of Contradiction

A final problem for both theories is one that you’ve probably already thought of. It is the problem of contradiction. A contradiction occurs when a statement is said to be both true and false at the same time. It’s a contradiction, for instance, to both assert and deny that the Empire State Building is in New York. Theories that generate contradictions are incoherent. They can’t be true; they are muddled and inconsistent.

It looks like subjectivism leads to contradiction. We can see this by considering its test of truth and falsity:

(S) A moral judgment is true if it accurately reports one’s feelings or commitments, and is false otherwise.

If (S) is correct, then people on opposite sides of a moral debate are both saying something true. The pro-choicer is speaking the truth when saying that abortion is morally right. And the abortion opponent is also speaking the truth when saying that it is immoral. But abortion can’t be both right and wrong. That is a contradiction.

We can summarize the worry in the Contradiction Problem for Subjectivism:

1. Any theory that generates contradictions is false.
2. Ethical subjectivism generates contradictions.
3. Therefore, ethical subjectivism is false.

Premise 1 is definitely true. A theory is incoherent if it tells us that the same claim is simultaneously true and false. So subjectivists have to find a way to attack 2.

They have done that. There is a subjectivist strategy for avoiding contradiction, but it has its costs. The solution implies that we usually don’t mean what we say in our moral debates. What we say are things such as the following:

- The death penalty is immoral.
- Abortion is wrong.
- Eating animals is okay.

But what we mean is this:

- The death penalty is wrong, according to me.
- I disapprove of abortion.
- As I see it, eating animals is okay.

And just like that, the contradictions disappear!

Suppose that you and your friend disagree about whether eating animals is wrong. You say it is; she says it isn’t. As the subjectivist sees things, you are saying that you disapprove of meat eating; she says that she approves of it. These claims don’t contradict each other. This sort of strategy will work across the board, for all moral claims, and so we can save subjectivism from contradiction.

Here are the costs. First, subjectivists have to accuse nearly everyone of misunderstanding their own moral claims. And second, such a view eliminates the possibility of moral disagreement.

To illustrate the first problem, consider this conversation:

ME: Genocide is immoral.
SUBJECTIVIST: What I’m hearing is—you disapprove of genocide.
ME: Yes, I disapprove of genocide. But that’s not what I’m saying. I’m not talking about my attitudes. I’m talking about genocide. You’re changing the subject.
Subjectivists can’t make sense of my reply here. It’s not that my reply might be false. Rather, my reply is unintelligible, since it assumes that moral talk is about something other than my own commitments. Most of us assume precisely that. If subjectivism is right, we are badly mistaken.

In order to avoid the problem of contradiction, subjectivists have to say that our moral assertions report facts only about our own commitments. When I say that genocide is wrong, I am not saying that it has a certain feature—wrongness. I am saying that I disapprove of it or that my principles forbid it. I am talking about myself. That’s not what most people think they are doing when they make their moral judgments.

The second problem is even more serious. Subjectivism is unable to explain the existence of moral disagreement. In order to avoid generating contradictions, subjectivists have to understand all moral judgments as reports of personal approval or disapproval. The claim that meat eating is wrong becomes the claim that I disapprove of meat eating. The judgment that bravery is a virtue becomes the claim that bravery is something I admire. And so on. But on this line, moral debates that seem to involve intense disagreement become something completely different. In fact, it now becomes impossible for people to morally disagree with one another.

To see this, imagine an earlier dispute.

**You say:** It’s wrong to eat meat.
**And your friend says:** It’s okay to eat meat.

The subjectivist translates this as follows:

**You:** I disapprove of eating meat.
**Your friend:** I approve of eating meat.

The contradiction has indeed disappeared. But so has the disagreement. If you are both taking this seriously, you’ll agree with your friend’s claim, and she with yours. If all that moral judgments do is report people’s outlooks, then there is no way to morally disagree with anyone who is speaking sincerely. But that seems plainly wrong.

In short, subjectivism faces a dilemma. If we take moral claims at face value, then subjectivism generates contradictions, and so it must be false. If we reinterpret all moral claims to be focused on our attitudes, then the contradictions disappear, but so, too, does moral disagreement.

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**Cultural Relativism and the Problem of Contradiction**

Cultural relativism faces the same dilemma. It says that a moral judgment is true just because it correctly describes what a society really stands for. For instance, if different societies disagree about the appropriate political status of women, then members of each society are speaking the truth when they assert (or deny) female moral equality. But they can’t all be right. The statement that women are deserving of full political equality cannot be simultaneously true and false.

Relativists can escape this problem in familiar ways. They will claim that moral judgments are true only relative to social agreements. On this line of thinking, moral judgments are just like legal ones. It isn’t contradictory to say that smoking marijuana, for instance, is both legal and illegal, so long as we qualify things to note that it is legal in some areas and illegal in others.

Relativists will say that all of our moral claims have to be understood by reference to social agreements. When you say that meat eating is right, and your Hindu friend from Calcutta says that it is wrong, what is really being said is this:

**You:** Meat eating is accepted by my social customs.
**Your friend:** Meat eating is forbidden by my social customs.

And again, both of these claims can be true. The contradiction disappears. There is no single judgment that is both true and false.

But then the existence of cross-cultural moral disagreement also disappears. The same pattern we just saw in the meat eating case will constantly repeat itself. If all we do when making moral judgments is to issue sociological reports about what our society stands for, then cross-cultural moral disagreement vanishes. We are no longer talking about (say) meat eating, abortion, or drug use. We are talking about how our society feels about such things.

But it doesn’t seem as if that is what serious moral debate is all about. For instance, it appears possible to note that one’s society approves of making wives domestic slaves and yet to disagree with the morality of that policy. But that’s not so if relativism is to escape the contradiction problem.

So the cultural relativist faces the same dilemma as the subjectivist. If moral claims are taken literally, then relativism generates contradiction. If moral claims are instead veiled reports of cultural commitments, then contradictions disappear, but cross-cultural disagreement becomes impossible.
Indeed, the relativist is in one way more vulnerable than the subjectivist here; the cultural relativist may be unable to escape contradiction after all.

People who are members of subcultures—smaller cultural groups located within larger ones—often face a familiar problem. They are forced to choose between allegiance to the larger society and to their particular subculture. They are members of at least two societies, and when their ethical codes conflict, these unfortunate people are faced with contradictory moral advice.

This isn’t some philosopher’s fiction. Such cases happen all the time. We could easily multiply examples, but this famous one from my home state should be enough to make the point.

Consider the facts of Wisconsin v. Yoder, a case resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972. Wisconsin then required regular school attendance of all children up to the age of sixteen. The sons of three Old Order Amish families had stopped going to school after the eighth grade, in obedience to their parents’ beliefs that continued schooling would conflict with their religious values. The students were found guilty of violating the state law, but the verdict was overturned by the state’s supreme court. Wisconsin then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which sided with the Amish families.

In its decision, the Court’s majority announced the following:

They [the Amish families] object to the high school, and higher education generally, because the values they teach are in marked variance with Amish values and the Amish way of life; they view secondary school education as an impermissible exposure of their children to a “worldly” influence in conflict with their beliefs. The high school tends to emphasize intellectual and scientific accomplishments, self-distinction, competitiveness, worldly success, and social life with other students. Amish society emphasizes informal learning-through-doing; a life of “goodness,” rather than a life of intellect; wisdom, rather than technical knowledge; community welfare, rather than competition; and separation from, rather than integration with, contemporary worldly society.

The schoolchildren lived in (at least) two societies at once: their Amish community and the larger state of Wisconsin. If relativism is correct, then the morality of your actions depends entirely on whether they are allowed by the standards of the society they are performed in. But if you live in different societies, and their ethical codes clash, then your actions will be both moral and immoral. That is a contradiction.

We could solve this problem if we could figure out which society’s code is more important. But relativism doesn’t allow us to do that. By its lights, no society’s moral code is any better than another’s. We might be tempted to let the children decide, and say that the social code that takes priority is the one that the children prefer. But this would undermine cultural relativism, since such a move would make the morality of their actions depend on personal choice. They would get to pick the code that is to govern their lives. That is subjectivism, not relativism.

Indeed, critics of cultural relativism often say that the doctrine eventually collapses into subjectivism. When your views and society’s views clash, why think that society is always right? If morality is created by humans, then it is hard to justify the claim that moral wisdom always lies with the masses rather than with individuals. The majority may have the power to force the minority to do as it says. But might doesn’t make right.

Subjectivists claim that in conflicts between personal and social commitments, the individual is always morally wiser. Cultural relativists take the opposite line. But perhaps things are not so cut and dried. Sometimes individuals have the upper hand; sometimes societies do. And sometimes, perhaps, both individuals and societies are mistaken, even in their deepest commitments. If that is ever so, then we must look elsewhere for an account of morality’s true nature.

Ideal Observers

There is a natural way to fix some of these problems for the subjectivist and relativist. We should guarantee that those who create the moral law (whether each individual or whole societies) are not choosing from ignorance, but are equipped with full information. We should also make sure that they are reasoning clearly and avoiding logical errors. In other words, rather than allow us as we actually are (warts and all) to have the final word in morality, we should make the desires and choices of ideal observers the ultimate standard of morality. Ideal observers can survey the scene more dispassionately, more knowledgeably, and more rationally. They are better suited to inventing the moral law than we mere mortals are.

According to this new and improved version of subjectivism, an act is morally right just because I would favor it were I fully informed and perfectly rational. The relativist version says that acts are morally right just
because a society would approve of them were its members fully informed and rational.

This will surely correct some of the problems that we have noted: (1) Even the core moral beliefs of individuals and societies may now be mistaken, as their views may fail to measure up to those of the ideal observers. (2) The views of individuals and societies will not be morally equivalent, since some will better match those of the ideal observers. (3) The sincere endorsements of slavery and genocide will not automatically be morally authoritative, since such endorsements are almost always based on ignorance and irrationality. (4) Moral progress will now be possible, and will occur when the moral views of individuals and societies more closely reflect those of ideal observers. (5) There will be real disagreement between conflicting moral views, since moral judgments will not be reports of personal opinion or cultural consensus, but will rather be claims about what ideal observers will approve of.

These are real improvements. But ideal observer views are not problem-free. In fact, there are two serious concerns. The first occurs if there is ever any disagreement among ideal observers. The ideal observer view says that perfectly rational and intelligent people create morality through their choices. If that is so, then if such people make conflicting choices, this will cause contradictions. And contradictions fatally undermine any theory that contains them.

Perhaps perfectly smart and rational people will never disagree about anything. But why the optimism? Those who know all there is to know about embryology, for instance, might still morally disagree about abortion. After all, on the ideal observer views, such geniuses are not trying to understand the morality of the actions they are assessing. Before they make their decisions, there is no morality. Ideal observers don’t respond to a world with moral features. Their preferences and choices create morality. But then there doesn’t seem to be anything to prevent them from having conflicting attitudes. If they do, contradiction results.

I think that there is a successful solution to this problem. We can borrow a strategy we’ve seen before, when discussing a similar problem that arose for social contract theories and virtue ethics. The strategy tells us that an action is morally required or forbidden only if all ideal observers agree in their attitudes about it. If all ideal observers endorsed an action,

then it would be morally required. If they all opposed it, it would be forbidden. And if they disagreed on the matter, then it would be morally permitted—neither required nor forbidden. By making morality depend on the attitudes of all ideal judges, rather than each one individually, this theory can indeed avoid contradiction.

But another problem cannot be handled so easily. The view on the table says this: nothing is intrinsically right; things become right just because an ideal observer would favor it. But what if such people thought that killing off the mentally ill was a great idea? What if they thought that sadism was preferable to compassion? What if they approved of apartheid policies?

You might think such a thing impossible. But why? Evil people need not be factually ignorant or illogical. Vast knowledge doesn’t guarantee a sympathetic nature. Greater logical skills don’t automatically translate to greater kindness. Even the most rational and well informed among us can be biased, hateful, and cruel.

Recall how we got here. Subjectivism and cultural relativism allow the basic views of individuals or societies to determine the ultimate moral standards. But such basic views can be the product of ignorance, bias, and poor reasoning. We tried to fix this problem by changing the theories so that the authors of morality were ideal versions of us. They would be people with perfect information, and perfect logical skills. And yet, as we’ve seen, this modified view has troubles of its own, and fails to solve the worry that led to its creation. The very smartest people can also be the coldest and cruellest.

This is a deep problem for ideal observer views. In fact, the problem should be a familiar one, since it is the same one that threatens the divine command theory. The divine command theory says that no acts are intrinsically right or wrong; their morality depends entirely on whether God approves of them. On this view, acts are morally right just because God insists that we do them, and wrong because He loathes them.

The basic problem is that actions don’t become right just because someone (even God) happens to favor them. Think back to our earlier discussion of the Euthyphro dilemma. Either God has reasons for His commands or He doesn’t. If He doesn’t, then the commands are arbitrary, and can’t

4. See chapter 14, pp. 208–09; see also chapter 17, pp. 267–68.

5. See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of the divine command theory.

provide the basis for a legitimate morality. But if God does have reasons for His commands, then these reasons, rather than God's say-so, are what explain why various actions are right. God can ratify the moral standards. He can know every one of them. He can convey them to us. But He cannot be their author, on pain of resting morality on arbitrary foundations.

The same line of reasoning works to undermine all of the views we have considered in this chapter. Subjectivism, cultural relativism, and ideal observer theories all share the same basic structure. On these views, nothing is right or wrong in and of itself. Actions have the moral status they do only because I or my society actually approve of them, or would approve of them if we were perfectly intelligent. How can the decisions of any such person or group be so powerful as to transform a valueless activity into something good or right?

These morally all-powerful people either are or aren't basing their decisions on good reasons. If there are no good reasons to support their decisions, then the decisions are arbitrary, and cannot be the basis of a morality worthy of our respect. But if there are good reasons to support the decisions, then the reasons, rather than the decision, determine the morality of the actions in question.

Suppose, for instance, that I (or my society or an ideal observer or God) have reasons that support my disapproval of torture. And these are the reasons: the pain it imposes, its unreliability as a source of valuable information, the disrespect it reveals, and the way it renders its victims utterly powerless. If these really are good reasons, then they are all that's needed to make torture wrong. My disapproval doesn't add anything to these reasons. If I am really wise, then my disapproval can be very good evidence of something's immorality. But the approval cannot turn a morally neutral action into a forbidden one.

Socrates' argument against the divine command theory is just as powerful when brought against subjectivism, relativism, and ideal observer theories. If his line of reasoning is correct, then our approval is not enough to make something right. Acts are right because they are supported by excellent reasons, and not because individuals or groups just happen to favor them.

**Conclusion**

Both cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism are popular ways of challenging the idea that morality is objective. But as we've seen, both theories face a similar set of problems. They make all moral views or all social codes morally equivalent. They make the deepest commitments of each person or each society morally infallible, even if the commitments are based on ignorance or prejudice. Neither theory offers a way to evaluate our guiding ideals, since these ideals are said to be true by definition. Neither theory allows for fundamental moral progress. Both theories generate contradictions, and can eliminate this worry only by making moral disagreement impossible.

This laundry list of complaints explains why cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism have found little favor among philosophers. For those with doubts about the objectivity of morality, nihilistic alternatives may have more to offer.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is the difference between cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism? Why are both theories inconsistent with ethical objectivism?
2. In what sense does ethical subjectivism make us morally infallible? Is this an advantage or a disadvantage of the theory?
3. Can ethical relativism make sense of the idea of moral progress? Does moral progress really exist?
4. One might object that the theories of ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism both generate contradictions. How might a subjectivist or relativist respond to this criticism? Do you find their replies to be adequate?
5. How does the notion of an "ideal observer" solve some of the problems with relativism and subjectivism? What do you think is the most serious objection to ideal observer theories? Can this objection be overcome?
There are basically three options when it comes to determining the status of morality. Morality might be objective, its rules applying to us independently of our opinions and desires. Or it might be relativistic, and depend for its authority on personal or cultural preferences. Finally, morality may simply be a kind of make-believe, a complex set of rules and recommendations that represents nothing real. This last option is known as moral nihilism (from the Latin word nihil, meaning “nothing”).

Moral nihilists join with relativists in opposing ethical objectivism. Morality is wholly a human creation—in this, nihilists and relativists are united. But nihilists are no fans of ethical relativism. Relativists believe in moral goodness, moral duty, and moral virtue. Nihilists don’t. Nihilists deny that there are any moral qualities. There are no moral requirements. Nothing is morally good. Nothing merits praise or blame.

According to nihilists, there is a rigid fact-value distinction, which basically says that there is a sharp difference between facts and values. As nihilists see things, values are on the wrong side of the divide. Facts exist; values don’t. Value claims cannot be factual, and so cannot be true. Factual claims inform us of things; value claims are not informative, since they describe nothing. You might think that it’s a fact that betraying a friend is immoral, or a fact that happily giving to the needy is morally virtuous. But if nihilism is right, there are no such facts. Facts are real; values aren’t.

There are two important forms of moral nihilism: the error theory and expressivism. Error theorists claim that our moral judgments are always mistaken. Expressivists deny this, while also denying that our moral claims can ever offer an accurate take on reality. Expressivism is the more complicated doctrine, so let’s ease our way into the nihilist camp by first considering the error theory.

Error Theory

Did you ever have the feeling, deep down, that morality is a sham? That it’s just a set of traditional rules inherited from ancestors who based it on ignorance, superstition, and fear? Perhaps it’s only a convenient fiction, with no underlying authority at all.

The error theory of morality is built upon these doubts. It is defined by three essential claims:

1. **There are no moral features in this world.** Nothing is morally good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious. A careful inventory of the world’s contents will reveal all sorts of scientific qualities: being symmetrical, being a liquid, being two feet long, carbon-based, spherical, and so on. But the list will contain no moral features.

2. **No moral judgments are true.** Why not? It’s simple: there is nothing for them to be true of. There are no moral facts. And so no moral claims can be accurate, since there are no moral facts for them to record.

3. **Our sincere moral judgments try, and always fail, to describe the moral features of things.** Thus we always lapse into error when thinking in moral terms. We are trying to state the truth when we make moral judgments. But since there is no moral truth, all of our moral claims are mistaken. Hence the error.

It follows that:

4. **There is no moral knowledge.** Knowledge requires truth. If there is no moral truth, there can be no moral knowledge.

Error theorists are not launching some small-scale attack on morality. They are not criticizing our current views on, say, welfare policy or capital punishment, and trying to replace them with better ones. Rather, as they see it, all moral views are equally bankrupt. There is some very deep mistake that everyone committed to morality is making. The error theorist promises to reveal that mistake, and so to expose the real truth: morality is nothing but a fiction.
For those who are fond of analogies, the following may help. The error theory is to morality as atheism is to religion. Error theorists and atheists are skeptics. They deny the truth of a widely accepted worldview. They do this by trying to pinpoint an error that is said to lie at the very heart of the system they oppose.

Atheists are, in effect, error theorists about religion. They believe that there are no religious features of the world, that no religious claims are true, and that religious believers try (and always fail) to speak the truth about God. They deny that there is any religious knowledge. The central explanation for all of this is simple. If atheists are right, then common religious claims (God speaks to me; God created the universe; God knows everything) are all wrong, because they are based on the mistaken assumption that God exists.

Atheists can successfully defend their view only if they can convince us that there is an error at the heart of religious belief. Likewise, moral error theorists can vindicate their view only if they can show that there is some fatal flaw at the heart of morality.

And that depends on what the fundamental error of morality is supposed to be. In principle, we can develop any number of error theories, depending on which basic error morality is supposed to commit. But in practice, there really has been only one candidate.

All error theorists have agreed that the core mistake that undermines morality is its assumption that there are objective moral standards that supply each of us with an excellent reason for obedience, regardless of what we care about. According to error theorists, just as religion crucially depends on the supernatural, morality essentially depends on its being objective and providing us with categorical reasons—reasons that apply to us regardless of whether acting on them will get us what we want.1 If this central assumption is mistaken, then the entire enterprise of morality is bankrupt.

There are two substantial points that error theorists must convince us of. First, they must show that buying into morality really does assume a commitment to moral objectivity and categorical reasons. That will be news to many—to subjectivists and relativists, for instance, and to expressivists, whose views we are soon to discuss. If morality does not, in fact, rely on these assumptions, then the error theorist’s criticisms will fail.

1. For more on categorical reasons, please see the discussion in chapter 11, pp. 162–63.

But suppose that the coherence of our moral thinking and practice does indeed depend on the twin assumptions that morality is objective and that it provides us with categorical reasons. This reveals the second burden that error theorists must shoulder: they must show that at least one of these assumptions is false.

Perhaps they can do that. We have already considered arguments concerning our reasons to be moral,2 and will (in the next chapter) look at the most prominent attempts to undermine the objectivity of morality. So, rather than repeat those efforts, let us consider some implications of the error theory.

Though very few people outside of philosophical circles have ever heard of the error theory, the worry it expresses is familiar enough. And so, too, is the typical response: abandoning morality would have absolutely terrible results. Further, even to seriously consider that morality may be a fiction is to show a corrupt mind, and error theorists are therefore not to be trusted. Once people give up on morality, they will feel free to act in any way they please. It won’t be pretty.

There are actually two lines of criticism at work here, and both are mistaken. The first we might call the Argument from Disastrous Results:

1. If widespread acceptance of a view would lead to disastrous results, then that view is false.
2. Widespread acceptance of the error theory would lead to disastrous results.
3. Therefore, the error theory is false.

It’s an interesting question whether premise 2 is true. I won’t venture an opinion here on whether it is. Nor do we need to, since premise 1 is definitely false. The truth of a theory does not depend on the results of everyone’s embracing it.

To see this, consider a similar argument against atheism. Some people claim that widespread belief in atheism would generate disaster. I don’t know if that’s right, but suppose it is. Still, that is no evidence that God exists. After all, if some highly classified state secrets were revealed and became widely accepted, that might cause disaster, too. But that hardly shows that the claims made in those documents are false. So we cannot undermine the error theory by arguing that its popular acceptance would lead to the downfall of civilization—even if it would.

Some have found premise 1 tempting because they have confused it with a close cousin:

1a. If widespread practice of a given action will lead to disastrous results, then that action is immoral.

But this really is a confusion, since premise 1 speaks of theories and their truth, rather than actions and their moral status. And in any event, 1a is false, as we saw in an earlier discussion. If everyone were to practice celibacy, then disaster would ensue. That doesn't show that it is immoral to be celibate.

Others have confused premise 1 with a more specific version:

1b. If widespread acceptance of a moral theory would yield disastrous results, then that theory is false.

This cannot be so easily dismissed. Many philosophers have thought that 1b is true, though a number of others—mostly utilitarians—have rejected it. Fortunately, we do not have to settle the matter here, because the error theory is not a moral theory. It does not try to tell us where our duty lies, or which character traits are virtues. The error theory rejects all moral theories, and says that every single one is mistaken. Since the error theory is not a moral theory, principle 1b simply does not apply to it.

If the error theory isn't a moral theory, then what is it? In fancy terms, it is a metaphysical theory—a theory about what the world is truly like, and what really exists. Theism is a metaphysical theory. It says that God exists. Other metaphysical theories try to defend the existence of the soul, or free will, or immortality.

The basic problem with the Argument from Disastrous Results is that metaphysical theories cannot be tested in the way that its first premise claims. For instance, we cannot prove that we have free will, just by showing (if we can) that terrible results would occur if we abandoned our belief in it. Metaphysical theories try to tell us what the world is like. Such theories might contain some bitter truths, ones that, if widely accepted, would lead to heartache, or loss of faith, or the breakdown of longstanding customs and social practices. (That's what makes them bitter.) At best, this


4. Many utilitarians think that widespread acceptance of the principle of utility might actually have quite bad results, despite firmly believing that the principle is true. See chapter 10, p. 139 for a discussion of this point.

might give us some reason not to publicize these claims. But that is no reason to suppose that they are false.

Another popular objection to the error theory is really targeted at error theorists themselves. The idea here is that those who reject categorical reasons and the objectivity of morality are bound to be untrustworthy. Conscience serves as an effective check on our antisocial impulses only if we see moral duty as something real, as a set of rules imposed from the outside, ones that have genuine authority over us. Error theorists reject this picture, and so will feel free to let their destructive, self-interested impulses take control of their decisions. Since error theorists are so untrustworthy, the views they put forth are not to be trusted, either.

But this way of thinking is mistaken as well. Error theorists can care deeply about others, and can be strongly opposed to doing the things that we traditionally regard as morally wrong (killing, raping, stealing). Of course error theorists, if consistent, will not regard such actions as immoral. But they may still be dead set against such behavior; they might find it distasteful, undesirable, unproductive, or otherwise unappealing.

Still, one might argue that error theorists are not guaranteed to have the sorts of goals that we associate with upright behavior. And that is true. But then again, such a guarantee fails to hold for many people who reject the error theory. How many atrocities each year are committed in the name of one morality upon those with different moral beliefs? Far more than are committed by error theorists!

All that aside, this kind of criticism does nothing to address the issue of whether the error theory itself is true. Indeed, it represents a classic kind of fallacy—the ad hominem attack. When leveling such a critique, one tries to undermine the truth of a position by criticizing the character of its supporters. Don't like the message? Attack the messenger. Aside from being bad sport, such a strategy entirely misses the mark. We want to know whether morality is all make-believe. We can't answer that question by engaging in character assassination.

The only way to answer it is by doing two things. First, we need to determine whether error theorists are correct in thinking that morality really does depend on two assumptions: (i) that it is objective, and (ii) that it supplies us with reasons to obey it, regardless of our desires. I am not sure about whether this is what we really are committed to when thinking morally. Certainly, subjectivists and relativists deny these assumptions. And so they will deny the existence of any error, since they reject the thought that morality depends on claims (i) and (ii).
But suppose that error theorists are right about what we are committed to when we adopt a moral outlook. To defend their view, they must then show that categorical reasons do not exist, and that morality is not objective. Can they do this? Stay tuned.

Expressivism

Expressivism is another family of views that deny the objectivity of morality. Indeed, expressivists accept the first two claims that define the error theorist’s point of view:

1. There are no moral features in this world.
2. No moral judgments are true.

Unlike error theorists, however, expressivists think that morality is in pretty good shape. There is no deep error at the heart of our moral thinking. But how can that be, if 1 and 2 are true?

Simple. Expressivists reject the third feature that is essential to error theory:

3. Our sincere moral judgments try (and always fail) to describe the moral features of things.

According to expressivists, we are not trying to speak the truth when making moral judgments. We are not making an effort to describe the way the world is. We are not trying to report the moral features possessed by various actions, motives, or policies. Instead, we are venting our emotions, commanding others to act in certain ways, or revealing a plan of action. When we condemn torture, for instance, we are expressing our opposition to it, indicating our disgust at it, publicizing our reluctance to perform it, and strongly encouraging others not to go in for it. We can do all of these things without trying to say anything that is true.

One of the basic ideas behind expressivism is that moral claims function very differently from straightforward factual claims. Factual claims try to represent the way the world really is. If expressivism is right, moral claims serve quite different purposes.

I know that sounds puzzling. To get a better sense of what is going on here, consider this sentence:

(A) Torture is immoral.

It appears to function just like this sentence:

(B) The sea is salty.

Sentence (B) tells us that the sea has a certain feature—being salty. Sentence (A) looks similar. It tells us that torture has a certain feature—being immoral. And there’s nothing special about (A). All moral claims seem to assign a moral quality to something or other. But if there aren’t any such qualities, then aren’t our moral claims always mistaken?

Not necessarily. If expressivism is true, then the similarity between sentences such as (A) and (B) is only superficial. When we say that torture is immoral, for instance, we are not describing torture. We are not saying that it has any features at all. We aren’t even describing our feelings about it (as subjectivists claim). Rather, it’s as if we were saying one of the following:

• Torture—argghhh!
• Don’t torture!
• Let me plan a life that doesn’t include torturing others.
• Won’t everyone please refrain from torture?

These utterances can’t be true. But they can’t be false, either. And that’s the central difference between expressivism and error theories. The error theorist thinks that our sincere moral claims are always meant to state the truth, but since there isn’t any moral truth, such claims are all mistaken. The expressivist, by contrast, thinks that our moral claims are largely all right, since they are doing what they are intended to do.

And what is that? According to expressivists, moral claims are not in the business of holding up a mirror to the world. Their job is to vent our feelings, give orders and commands, and express our commitments. Since they manage to do that just fine, there is no reason to charge them with error.

The basic philosophical motivation behind expressivism is pretty straightforward. Expressivists want a way to have confidence in morality while rejecting ethical objectivity. In doing so, they also want to avoid the difficulties that hamper cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism.

The biggest problem for relativism and subjectivism (as we saw in the previous chapter) is that these views either generate contradictions or are unable to explain moral disagreement. Expressivists handle both problems with ease.

Contradictions arise when the same claim is said to be true and false at the same time. If expressivists are right, no moral claim is either true or false. And so moral contradictions disappear.
Expressivists see moral disagreement as a clash of emotions or personal commitments. Debates about torture, for instance, reveal nothing about torture's moral features (since there aren't any), but a lot about the feelings of the differing parties. One side feels angered and upset by torture, and the other doesn't. The emotional investment we see in so many moral debates is just what we should expect, given the expressivist analysis of moral disagreement.

Expressivists cannot escape the worry about moral equivalence, however. Their official view is that there are no moral values, and no moral truth. If that is so, then all moral views are on par with one another. Some such views may be more internally consistent than others; some may contain fewer factual errors; others may be more likely to bring happiness or contentment. Yet none of these things makes a moral view closer to the truth.

There are further worries. Three seem to be especially serious.

How Is It Possible to Argue Logically about Morality?
If, as expressivists say, moral claims cannot be true, then this makes it very difficult to understand how moral argument is possible. Logical argumentation is truth preserving—a logically valid argument is defined as one whose conclusion must be true, provided that its premises are true. If, as expressivists say, moral claims cannot be true, then how could they possibly be used to support other claims?

To see the worry here, consider this argument:
1. All actions that dehumanize people are immoral.
2. Torture dehumanizes people.
3. Therefore, torture is immoral.

The argument appears to be logically perfect. If you accepted both premises, you would have to accept the conclusion. After all, this argument has the very same logical structure as a philosophical classic:
1. All men are mortal.
2. Socrates is a man.
3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

And everyone admits that this argument is logically valid. Given the truth of the two premises, the conclusion can't possibly be false.

From a logical point of view, these two arguments appear to be identical. And there is a natural explanation for this: the first two premises in each argument can be true, and if they are, then the conclusion must be true as well. But expressivists cannot accept this natural explanation, since they deny that moral claims can be true.

Look at the first argument. If premise 1 really means:
1a. Dehumanizing actions—yecchhh! or
1b. Don't dehumanize people!

then there is no way that this premise can be used to logically support any conclusion. But it seems clear that it is being used in precisely this way. The logic of the first argument is watertight—even if you are suspicious about the merits of the actual premises. Indeed, logical moral argumentation seems like a real possibility—we do it all the time (and have been doing it throughout this book). Expressivism does not seem able to explain this.

Expressivism and Amoralists
An amoralist is someone who sincerely makes moral claims, but is entirely unmoved by them. Such people create a serious problem for expressivism.

Expressivists warn us not to be fooled by the superficial similarity between factual claims (the sea is salty) and moral ones (torture is immoral). Moral claims assert nothing. They describe nothing. Instead, they express our feelings. Indeed, that is how the expressivist explains why our moral judgments so reliably motivate us. These judgments convey our feelings, and our feelings are what move us to act.

But this makes it impossible for someone, say, to really think that charity is admirable and yet be indifferent when it comes to forking out his own money. It would be impossible for a soldier to think it his duty to face enemy fire, while remaining completely unmotivated to do so. Such cases may really be impossible. But the evidence points the other way. Amoralism is unusual, to be sure, but not unheard of.

Indeed, expressivism faces the same problem that psychological egoism does. In the face of evidence that supports the existence of altruism, egoists insist that people must be either deceiving themselves or lying to us.
about their motivations. Expressivists have to say the same thing about the
evidence of amoralism. All such evidence must be disqualified. The person
who really is lacking in motivation cannot be sincere in his moral claims.
Or, if he is sincere, then he really must be motivated, and so his claims to
the contrary are either lies or instances of self-deception. Such a diagnosis
may be correct. But the burden here weighs heavily on the expressivist’s
shoulders.

The Nature of Moral Judgment
A final concern has to do with whether expressivists are right to challenge
the dominant view of what we do when we make moral judgments. Ethical
objectivists, ethical relativists, and error theorists agree on almost nothing.
But they have reached consensus on one point: moral claims try to tell us
about the moral features that things actually have. Moral judgments can be
true or false, depending on how well they report the truth about which
things have which moral qualities.

Expressivists deny this. They reject the idea that moral claims are try­
ing to represent the way things are. They deny that there are any moral
features. They deny that moral judgments could ever offer accurate descrip­
tions of reality. How do we know whether their hypothesis is correct?

Return to our original example, the claim that torture is immoral. If
we understand this literally, the sentence says that torture has a certain
feature—being immoral. As we saw, expressivists can’t read it this way.
They have to paraphrase this sentence so that it isn’t assigning any specific
feature to torture. Perhaps you found the various translations they offered
(p. 313) to be attractive. But what about these claims?

- Nobody but Jeff knows how to behave when the boss is around.
- I’m not sure whether torture is ever acceptable, but I am sure that
  some who are wiser than I am have the correct answer.
- There is a difference between an action’s being required, morally
good, virtuous, and deserving of praise.
- Some actions fulfill moral duties and yet lack moral worth.
- The degree of punishment should match the degree of wrongdoing.
- Virtue is its own reward.
- If war is immoral, then military generals are less virtuous than they
  seem.

Read as objectivists, subjectivists, relativists, or error theorists would
do, the sentence structure of these claims is transparent. They are readily
understandable. It’s not at all clear how expressivists could reword them to
turn them into commands, emotional expressions, or plans.

People put their words to various purposes. The best way to tell
whether people are joking, questioning, inviting, or trying to state the
truth is simply to ask them. People are usually pretty trustworthy on this
score. (Not always, of course. When we play to win at poker, or negotiate a
business deal, we may be deliberately misleading.) Still, exceptions aside,
people are the best judges of their own intentions, and their testimony in
such matters is usually reliable.

That’s not a thrilling point, but it has a direct bearing on expressivism’s
plausibility. When we ask people how they think of their moral claims,
almost everyone will reject the expressivist analysis. For the most part, we
do regard our moral claims as true. We regard our opponents’ views as
false. We take our moral condemnations to be cases of describing, say, the
injustice of insider trading, or reporting the moral corruption of a vicious
tyrant. At bottom, we intend our moral judgments to function as some­
thing other than emotional outbursts or expressions of commands or plans.

We might all be lying, or deceiving ourselves about what we are actu­
ally doing. But by far the more charitable view is that we mean what we say.
When making moral judgments, we are trying to speak the truth. We are
intending to state the facts. We aim to accurately present the moral details
of the situations we are thinking of. If that is so, then expressivism is in
serious trouble.

Conclusion
The vision of morality that so many of us believe in—one that sees moral­
ity as a set of objective duties and rules, supplying each of us with strong
reasons to do as it says—may be fundamentally mistaken. Subjectivists
and relativists certainly think so. And so do error theorists and expressiv­
ists. Error theorists are the most cynical of the lot, thinking as they do that
morality is a bankrupt enterprise. This thought stems from their view that
our moral thinking is based on assumptions that turn out to be false. If the
foundations of an entire way of thinking are corrupt, then the whole
worldview must come tumbling down. That’s the way atheists see religious
claims. And that is the way error theorists see moral ones.

Expressivists are not so pessimistic. They agree with error theorists in
denying that ethics is objective, and denying that moral duties supply us
with categorical reasons. But since expressivists do not believe that moral
thinking rests on these foundations, they don't feel the need to accuse the rest of us of error. Moral talk does pretty much what it is supposed to do—give vent to our emotions, express our feelings about things, and signal our commitments. And so there is little reason to worry.

But as we have seen, expressivism does give us some cause for concern. True, it offers a picture of morality that frees it of fundamental error. It solves the problem of contradiction. It neatly explains the nature of moral disagreement. It supports our view that emotions are a central part of moral judgment. And yet it has difficulty making sense of how logical moral argumentation is possible. It fails to make room for amoralism. It clashes with our views about what we are intending to do when we make moral judgments.

Expressivists are hard at work on these problems. There is a very lively conversation about the pros and cons of expressivism going on right now in philosophy departments around the world. In the last decade, this conversation has reached levels of sophistication that would have been unthinkable just a generation ago. It's far too early to tell whether expressivism is down for the count, or whether its defenders can identify new solutions to these perennial problems.

Even if, in the end, expressivism turns out to have more costs than benefits, this doesn't leave objectivists in the clear. It may be that morality is all make-believe, as error theorists claim. Most of us (especially we textbook authors!) hope this isn't so. Yet a hope is hardly evidence one way or the other. Whether we should think of morality as bankrupt depends on what the best arguments tell us about the nature of morality. We'll be in a better position to see the force of those arguments after working through the next chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the two types of moral nihilism, and what is the main difference between them? In what ways does each theory agree with ethical objectivism, and in what ways does each disagree?
2. What do error theorists typically claim is the "error" at the heart of our moral practice? Is the assumption that they identify really essential to our moral thought? If so, do you agree that it is an error?
3. What does it mean to say that stealing is wrong, according to expressivism? Do you find the expressivist translation to be plausible? Why or why not?
4. Why does the fact that people make logical arguments about moral issues raise a challenge for expressivism? How might an expressivist respond to this challenge?
5. What is an amoralist? Can expressivism make sense of the idea of such a person? If not, is this a problem for the theory?
Ethical objectivism is the view that there are some objective moral standards. Given my understanding of objectivity, this amounts to the view that these standards apply to everyone, even if people don’t believe that they do, and even if obeying them fails to satisfy a person’s desires. Moral claims are objectively true whenever they accurately tell us what these moral standards are, or tell us about what these standards require or allow us to do.

Moral skepticism, as I have defined it here, is the view that ethical objectivism is false, and thus that there are no objective moral rules and no objective moral truths. Unsurprisingly, the pros and cons of ethical objectivism and moral skepticism are mirror images of one another. As with any two contradictory positions, a big reason to favor one side is unhappiness with the other. Perhaps the biggest reason that so many people are moral skeptics is a suspicion that ethics just cannot be objective. Naturally, objectivists are happy to return the favor, and usually defend their own position by raising their serious doubts about moral skepticism. We’ve considered the leading skeptical views in the last two chapters, and have noted some of the difficulties they face. If these worries cannot be solved, and if objectivism can be defended against criticisms, then objectivism wins by default. Relativism, nihilism, and objectivism are the three options when it comes to the status of ethics. If two of these can be defeated, then the one left standing must be the correct account.

Objectivists, of course, believe that they’ll be the ones standing at the end of the day. Whether they are right about that depends on their ability to handle the many criticisms that have been sent their way. It’s now time to focus on these criticisms, to see whether objectivism can respond to them in a satisfying way.

There are many sources of doubt. As we’ll see, some of the most popular arguments are also the least plausible. But others represent deep and serious challenges. With the hardest of the objections, it is impossible to offer a final verdict in just a page or two, which is all I will allow myself here. My goal in this chapter is simply to show that, despite widespread doubts about ethical objectivism, none of the most popular skeptical arguments is obviously correct, and some, indeed, are pretty plainly unacceptable. And to those that represent more significant challenges, there are potentially promising replies that objectivists can offer.

Let’s consider some of the least plausible arguments first, before turning to critiques of objectivism that are more difficult to handle.

1. **Objectivity Requires Absolutism**

Many people claim that if morality were objective, then moral rules would have to be absolute. And since they aren’t, morality isn’t objective after all. The Argument from Absolutism summarizes this line of thought:

1. If moral claims are objectively true, then moral rules are absolute.
2. No moral rule is absolute.
3. Therefore, moral claims are not objectively true.

An absolute moral rule is one that is always wrong to break—no exceptions. I don’t know if there are any absolute moral rules. If there are, good candidates would include the prohibition on rape and on deliberately killing innocent people. Luckily we don’t have to settle this issue here, because even if premise 2 is true, and there are no absolute moral rules, premise 1 is false.

That first premise tells us that when it comes to morality, being objective and being absolute go hand in hand. But that isn’t so. The moral rule that forbids us from lying is probably not absolute; in some cases, morality would probably allow us to lie. For all we know, though, that rule could be objective. Ross, for instance, thought that the fundamental moral rules are

1. See chapter 15 for much more detailed discussion of this question.
objective. But he denied that they are absolute. Likewise, if God exists, and creates or reveals the moral law, then morality would be objective. But God might allow us to lie in certain circumstances, and might also permit us (in unusual cases) to break other moral rules. There is nothing in the very idea of an objective morality that requires moral rules to be absolute.

There is a general reason for this. The objectivity of moral rules has to do with their status: with whether they are correct independently of our opinion of them. The absoluteness of moral rules has to do with their stringency: with whether it is ever okay to break them. There is no direct connection between matters of status and stringency. This is clear when it comes to natural laws. Various biological and psychological laws admit of exceptions, and so are not absolute, even though they are objective.

This does not of course show that moral rules are objective. But it does support the view that even if they are, they do not have to be absolute. So premise 1 is false. And since it is, this argument does not threaten ethical objectivism.

2. All Truth Is Subjective

A popular thought in some circles is that claims can be true only relative to individual perspectives. On this line, there are no objective truths at all. Forget about morality for a moment—claims in logic, chemistry, or history can never be objectively true, either. So it's no surprise that objective morality is an illusion. The Argument against Objective Truths couldn't be simpler:

1. There are no objective truths.
2. Therefore, there are no objective moral truths.

The first thing to note about this argument is that, if it works, there is no special problem for morality. Most moral skeptics are trying to show that morality is in some ways second-rate, that it fares poorly in contrast to more precise disciplines such as mathematics and physics. By embracing a global kind of skepticism, this argument abandons that strategy.

The problem with this argument is its premise. Premise 1 is either true or false. If it is true, then the argument crumbles right away. So suppose that it is true. But this is impossible. The premise cannot be true. If it were, then there would be at least one objective truth—premise 1. And if there is at least one objective truth, then premise 1 is false! No matter how we look at it, then, this premise is false.

Since that is so, it follows directly that there are at least some objective truths. Perhaps none of them is a moral one. But we can't rely on this argument to support that skepticism.

3. Equal Rights Imply Equal Plausibility

I have heard countless moral disputes end on this conciliatory note: “Well, everyone has a right to their opinion. You have your view, and I have mine. Maybe we're both right.”

This familiar refrain is sometimes taken one step further in the following way: since everyone has a right to a moral opinion, no one's moral views are any better than anyone else's. And if everyone's moral opinions are on par with one another, then there is no objective moral truth.

These thoughts can be combined into an Argument from Equal Rights:

1. If everyone has an equal right to an opinion, then all opinions are equally plausible.
2. Everyone has an equal right to his or her moral opinions.
3. Therefore, all moral opinions are equally plausible.
4. If all moral opinions are equally plausible, then ethical objectivism is false.
5. Therefore, ethical objectivism is false.

The fourth premise is true. No question about it. If moral standards are objectively correct, then some people's views are going to be very far from the mark, and others are going to be right on target.

I also believe that the second premise is true. Everyone has a moral right to freedom of conscience. Each person is morally entitled to decide for herself what to believe, and not to be brainwashed into thinking what others want her to think.

If I am wrong about that, then so much the worse for the argument, since it obviously relies on the truth of premise 2. But the argument is a failure even if 2 is true, for premise 1 is false.

From the fact that we each have a right to our opinions, nothing at all follows about their plausibility. I was once walking through a forest with a
friend who knows a lot about trees. (I don’t.) I suggested that the one I was looking at was an ash. It wasn’t. He knew it was a larch. Our views were not equally plausible, even though I had as much a right to my opinion as he did his.

There are countless examples of cases in which people have an equal right to an opinion—that is, an equal right not to be forced to change their mind—even though their views are mistaken. Some historical claims are true and others false, even though we each have an equal right to our historical opinions. The same thing can be said of our opinions concerning economics, trigonometry, basketball strategy, or beer brewing. Most people know more than I do about each of these things, and so my views on these subjects are far less plausible than theirs. And yet my right to hold the views I do is just as strong as anyone else’s.

The first premise of the argument confuses two entirely separate matters: whether a person has a right to an opinion, and whether that opinion has any merit. This confusion undermines premise 1, and with it, the argument itself.

4. Moral Objectivity Supports Dogmatism

Pick any blowhard, tyrant, or political fanatic, and there is one thing they all share. They are all ethical objectivists. These are the folks who believe in moral truth with a capital T. Luckily for them, they have managed to discover that Truth. All they are trying to do is to let you in on some of it. This may take some shouting, perhaps some coercion, maybe even some killing, but Truth can be pretty demanding.

This thoroughly unpleasant picture yields the following Argument from Dogmatism:

1. If there are objective moral standards, then this makes dogmatism acceptable.
2. Dogmatism is unacceptable.
3. Therefore, there are no objective moral standards.

Dogmatism is the character trait of being closed-minded and unreasonably confident in one’s own opinions. Dogmatism is a vice, and if a theory recommends that we always close our minds to competing ideas, then that theory is very implausible. So premise 2 looks good. But ethical objectivism does not encourage a dogmatic attitude. The first premise of this argument is false.

By itself, the claim that there are objective moral standards is perfectly neutral about how broad-minded we should be. Ethical objectivism is a view about the status of moral claims. It does not tell us what is and is not morally acceptable. All it says is that the correct moral code, whatever it happens to be, is objectively true.

But we can say more. If moral truth is not of our own making, then it will not always be easy to discover. And that fact should encourage us to be humble, rather than arrogant and closed-minded. The proper outlook of astronomers and geologists and chemists is that of wonder, a recognition of one’s intellectual limitations, and an appreciation that no matter how smart you are, you’ll never know the entire truth about your subject matter. These are appropriate attitudes precisely because there are objective truths in these subjects. Scientists do not get to have the final word about the nature of reality. They might always be corrected by a later generation of thinkers.

If ethics, too, is a subject whose truths are objective, then we should also be open-minded about moral matters. It’s perfectly consistent to say that the answers to some questions are objectively true, even though you’re not sure what those answers are. If, in ethics, our say-so doesn’t make it so, then we are always liable to error. That should give us pause, and it should alert us to the dangers of being dogmatic.

Further, if each person does get to have the final word about morality—if an act is right just because a person approves of it—then people will almost never be morally mistaken. Moral knowledge would be extremely easy to come by. All you’d have to do is to check to see how you feel about an action. If you like it, it’s right; dislike it, wrong. If each person is the measure of morality, then we are practically infallible about moral matters. And that seems to be a perfect recipe for dogmatism. For why should I change my mind, or think myself mistaken, if the chances of error are almost zero?

It is true that the worst fanatics among us are always ethical objectivists. But that is not a strike against the theory. Rather, it is a strike against the individuals who misapply it. Such people fail to appreciate the complexity of morality and the much greater possibility of error that an objective morality allows.

Ethical objectivism is not committed to saying that moral wisdom is easy to get. In fact, as we have seen, objectivism makes such wisdom harder to come by than its competitors do. And so objectivism does not license dogmatism. Thus the first premise of this argument is mistaken. The argument is therefore unsound.
5. Moral Objectivity Supports Intolerance

A very popular reason for rejecting ethical objectivism is a concern for tolerance. People in open societies rightly value tolerance, but many think that tolerance would be threatened if moral standards were objectively correct. If some moral codes are better than others, then what's to stop those with the upper hand from lording it over those who embrace a faulty code of conduct?

Indeed, these critics say that the best way to support tolerance is to assume that all moral views are as good as any other. If that were so, then no one would be in a position to suppress the lifestyles of those who march to the beat of a different drummer. We would have to agree to disagree, since no one's moral outlook would be better than anyone else's. That is what is needed to support tolerance.

We can trace this line of thinking in the Argument from Tolerance:

1. Tolerance is valuable only if the moral views of different people are equally plausible.
2. If ethical objectivism is true, then the moral views of different people are not equally plausible.
3. Therefore, if ethical objectivism is true, then tolerance is not valuable.

That second premise is true. Ethical objectivism rejects the idea of moral equivalence. Some moral views are better than others.

But the first premise is false. In fact, ethical objectivism is much better than moral skepticism at supporting tolerance. The basic reason is this: if all moral views are equivalent, then a tolerant outlook is no better than an intolerant one. The outlook of a committed bigot would be as plausible as yours or mine.

Indeed, we can easily frame a counterargument that shows why the value of tolerance poses a threat to skepticism, rather than to objectivism:

1. If all moral views are equally plausible, then moral views supporting tolerance and those supporting intolerance are equally plausible.
2. These moral views are not equally plausible.
3. Therefore, some moral views are less plausible than others.

The first premise must be correct. And those who value tolerance will want to embrace the second. The conclusion follows directly.

6. Moral Disagreement Undermines Moral Objectivity

A classic argument against moral objectivity takes its cue from a simple observation: there is a lot more disagreement in ethics than there is in science. And there is a ready explanation for this. Scientists are trying to understand the nature of objective reality, whereas in ethics, there is no objective reality to be discovered. When it comes to morality, we are merely expressing our personal opinions, ones that have been obviously shaped by the time and place in which we've been raised. Different upbringings, different moral outlooks. But scientists the world over can agree on a wide set of truths, no matter their religious or cultural backgrounds.

The Argument from Disagreement nicely summarizes this line of thought:

1. If well-informed, open-minded, rational people persistently disagree about some claim, then that claim cannot be objectively true.
2. Well-informed, open-minded, rational people persistently disagree about all moral claims.
3. Therefore, no moral claim can be objectively true.

Perhaps premise 2 is too strong. Maybe there are some moral claims that every smart, rational, open-minded person accepts. But without a lot more investigation, it would be premature to assume that this is so.

What is clearly true is that for any moral claim—even one you find to be just obvious—there will always be someone else who thinks that it is
false. But that doesn’t show that premise 2 is true, since such people may not be well informed, or open-minded, or rational.

Indeed, moral disagreement might well be a product of sloppy reasoning, of not having enough facts under our belt, of having a personal stake in the outcome, or of a general prejudice. What if we were able to correct for these sources of error? Imagine people who were absolutely on top of all of the details, say, of affirmative action policies, who were free of personal bias and other prejudices, and who were able to reason flawlessly. Perhaps they’d all agree about whether affirmative action is morally acceptable.

Perhaps. But I share the skeptic’s concerns here, and am not sure that even perfectly ideal reasoners would agree about every moral issue. So let’s accept, at least for the moment, that premise 2 is true. What of premise 1?

That premise must be false. There are counterexamples galore. Brilliant physicists disagree about whether the fundamental elements of matter are subatomic strings; eminent archaeologists disagree about how to interpret the remains discovered at ancient sites; the finest philosophers continue to debate whether God exists. And yet there are objective truths in each area. There are objective truths about the fundamental nature of the physical world, about the nature of various prehistoric tribes, about whether there is or isn’t a God. Gaining knowledge of these truths can be hard, and perhaps, in cases, impossible. But our beliefs on these matters must answer to an objective reality. Our views don’t make physical or archaeological or philosophical claims true; the facts are what they are, independently of what we think of them.

There is another reason to doubt premise 1: this premise is itself the subject of deep disagreement. Really smart people still argue about whether it is true. And so, if such disagreement is enough to undermine objective truth, then the premise, by its own lights, can’t be objectively true! And it certainly isn’t “relatively” true—true just because I, or my society, believe in it. The premise, then, is false.

So deep disagreement, even among the best minds, is not enough to show that skepticism in an area is correct. As a result, the many disagreements we see in ethics are perfectly compatible with its objectivity.

7. Atheism Undermines Moral Objectivity

Recall (from chapter 5) the famous claim of Ivan Karamazov, one of Dostoevsky’s finest creations: if God is dead, then everything is permitted. His guiding thought is that true morality can exist only if God underwrites its authority. Morality is a sham if God does not exist, because the only way morality could rest on solid foundations is by being authored by God.

Some atheists have taken up this line of thinking and have used it to justify moral skepticism. If they are right, and God does not exist, then morality can’t possibly be objective. The Argument from Atheism expresses this outlook:

1. Morality can be objective only if God exists.
2. God does not exist.
3. Therefore, morality cannot be objective.

I’m going to make things much easier on myself by leaving that second premise alone. If it’s false, and God exists, then the argument crumbles. But let’s just assume for now that there is no God. Then what?

Well, if premise 1 is true, and objective morality really does depend on God, then moral skepticism is vindicated. Many people think that 1 is true. They reason as follows. Moral laws, like other laws, must have an author. But if the laws are objective, then (by definition) no human being can be their author. Who is? Three guesses.

This reasoning has always been very popular. But it is mistaken. It rests on this key assumption: laws require lawmakers. Suppose this assumption is true. It then follows that objective laws need lawmakers, too. But human beings cannot play this role, since objective truths are true independently of human opinion. That leaves only God to do the work.

But if atheism is true, then the crucial assumption is false. Laws would not require lawmakers. Atheists believe that there are objective laws—of logic, physics, genetics, statistics, and so on. And yet if God does not exist, these laws have no author. We discovered these laws. We invented the words to describe the laws. But they are not true because we believe them to be. Their truth is objective, not subjective. If atheists are correct, no one authored such laws.

Thus if atheism is true, objective laws do not require lawmakers. So, for all we know, objective moral laws do not require a lawmaker, either.

Atheists might say, though, that moral laws require lawmakers, even though other laws do not. But why single out morality like that? Surely we’d need an excellent reason for thinking that most objective laws need no author, though moral ones do.

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4. For much more on this line of reasoning, see the extended discussion in chapter 5, pp. 64–68.
Perhaps there is an explanation of this difference. But we can't just assume there is. For atheists who think so, they must point to something special about morality that requires its laws to have an author, even though all other objective laws lack one.

Until they do, we must think that the Argument from Atheism is unpersuasive. It will obviously do nothing to convince religious believers, since it just assumes (in premise 2) that they are wrong. But even if atheists are correct, and God does not exist, premise 1 is highly doubtful, because its best support is flawed. That support comes from the assumption that laws require lawmakers—an assumption that atheists themselves should not accept.

8. The Absence of Categorical Reasons Undermines Moral Objectivity

Most people think that all moral duties come prepackaged with a special power. They automatically supply people with reasons to obey them. And it doesn't matter what we care about. If it's really your duty to repay that loan or help your aged grandparents, then you've got an excellent reason to do so—even if doing these things fulfills none of your desires.

That's unusual. My reasons for writing this book, using my treadmill, or listening to music, all depend on what matters to me. Most reasons are like this. The reasons that come from morality, however, are categorical. They apply to us regardless of what we care about.5

Many philosophers cannot see how categorical reasons are possible. Their puzzlement has given rise to a powerful Argument from Categorical Reasons against ethical objectivism:

1. If there are objective moral duties, then there are categorical reasons to obey them.
2. There are no categorical reasons.
3. Therefore, there are no objective moral duties.

This argument has convinced some very smart philosophers. And they may be right to be convinced. But for those with objectivist leanings, there are two lines of response. Since the argument is logically perfect, objectivists have to reject either premise 1 or premise 2.

6. If this line can be defended, then we also have an adequate reply to error theorists. They claim that moral thinking assumes the existence of categorical reasons, but that no such reasons exist. But if morality does not make that assumption, then it may be in good shape even if there are no categorical reasons.
9. Moral Motivation Undermines Moral Objectivity

Ask yourself this question: if you sincerely judge an action to be your duty, aren’t you automatically motivated (at least a little bit) to do it? If you think a plan or a policy is a morally good one, aren’t you moved to some extent to help it along? If you answered yes, then you share the belief that moral judgments are motivational by their very nature. Their essence is to move people to act.

It’s not just a coincidence or some kind of minor miracle that moral judgments so reliably move us to act. They have this power because, at their core, what they do is express the very things that cause us to act—our desires, cares, commitments, and emotions. When we judge an action wrong, we are expressing our distaste or hatred of it, our desire that it not be done, our concern for those who might be harmed by it. Our moral judgments express our feelings, and our feelings are our basic motivations. That is why our moral judgments are so easily able to get us to act.

Contrast this picture with another one. Beliefs, unlike moral judgments, are not really in the business of getting us to act in certain ways. They are focused on stating the facts, on reporting the truth, on describing reality. If I believe that there is a computer monitor in front of me, two cats nearby, and an Oriental rug underfoot, I am not moved to act in any way at all. If I want to use the Internet, pet my cats, or vacuum the carpet, then these beliefs will help to direct my actions. But the key here is that beliefs can do this only by attaching themselves to my desires. If I didn’t want to use the Internet, pet my cats, or vacuum my rug, then none of these beliefs would have helped at all in guiding my actions.

This contrast between moral judgment, on the one hand, and belief, on the other, inspired David Hume to construct the following Motivational Argument. Generations of moral skeptics have found it compelling:

1. Moral judgments are able, all by themselves, to motivate those who make them.
2. Beliefs are never able, all by themselves, to motivate those who hold them.
3. Therefore, moral judgments are not beliefs.
4. If moral judgments are not beliefs, then they can’t be true.
5. Therefore, moral judgments can’t be true.

Have a look at that conclusion. Unlike the previous eight arguments, this one doesn’t say explicitly that ethical objectivism is false. But that will be cold comfort to the objectivist. If the conclusion of this argument is correct, then moral judgments can’t be true. And if they can’t be true, then they can’t be objectively true. And if they can’t be objectively true, then ethical objectivism is false.

Of the three premises in this argument, number 4 is pretty secure. If moral judgments are not beliefs, then they are expressions of plans, orders, commitments, desires, or emotions. Such expressions are not true or false. Suppose that I say that slavery is evil. And suppose that I am not thereby stating a belief, but rather expressing my emotions or commitments. What I’m really saying is “Don’t enslave people!” or “Slavery—grrrr.” These statements aren’t true (or false). So if moral judgments are not beliefs, then they can’t be true.

That leaves only two ways for objectivists to fight back against this argument. They can try to undermine the first premise, or the second. Unsurprisingly, objectivists have done both.

Some objectivists criticize 1, while accepting 2. They say that moral judgments are beliefs; beliefs cannot motivate all by themselves; and therefore moral judgments cannot motivate all by themselves. Moral judgments, like all beliefs, need a supplemental desire in order to move people to action.

These objectivists begin with an assumption: it’s possible that sincere moral judgments leave us entirely cold. True, since most people have moral concerns and want (at least a little) to be moral, moral judgments will motivate most of the people who make them. But some people just don’t care about morality. They judge things right or wrong and yet are completely unmoved. And that shows that premise 1 is false. Moral judgments cannot move people all by themselves.

Some objectivists take a different approach. They accept 1 and reject 2. So they insist that beliefs alone can motivate people to act. But clearly, not just any belief could do that. My belief that three plus three equals six, or that Peru is in South America, won’t move me to do a thing. But evaluative beliefs—beliefs that tell us what is good and bad, or right and wrong—may be able, all by themselves, to get us to act. If they can, then premise 2 is false.

7. Recall the lesson about such expressions from the previous chapter’s discussion of expressivism, p. 313.
8. These people are known as amoralists. Please see the discussion in the previous chapter, pp. 313–16, and in chapter 14, pp. 201–05, for more on amoralism.
Kant was one of those who rejected premise 2. Recall his claim (in chapter 12, pp. 174–75) that the good will involves only our reason, and not our desires or emotions. Reason tells us that something is our duty, and on the basis of that belief alone, we are motivated to do it. As Kant admitted, it isn't clear whether anyone has ever really acted from a good will, and so acted without the aid of any desires.

These issues are still very much at the center of discussion among philosophers. Objectivists will be able to defeat the Motivational Argument only if they can show that (a) moral beliefs can motivate all by themselves, or (b) they can't, but that this is okay, since not all moral judgments end up motivating people anyway.

### 10. Values Have No Place in a Scientific World

One of the tools that philosophers use when choosing between competing theories is called Occam's razor, after the medieval logician William of Occam (1285–1349). Occam's razor tells us never to multiply entities beyond necessity. What this means in practice is simple. When trying to separate fact from fiction, consider something to be real only if you need to assume its existence in order to explain what happens in the world.

Occam's razor explains why we shouldn't believe in such things as ghosts. Anything they might account for—spooky feelings in graveyards, creaking noises in old houses—can be better explained without assuming that ghosts really exist. Ghosts aren't needed to make sense of what we experience. So Occam's razor tells us that they don't exist.

Many people think that objective values are just like ghosts—creatures of our imagination. These critics deny that we really need to rely on moral features in order to explain the way the world works. Science is our path to understanding the nature of reality. And scientists never have to include moral features in their explanations of molecular structure, biological adaptations, heat transfer—or anything else. Calling something moral or immoral seems like a kind of luxury, one that adds nothing to understanding the ultimate nature of reality.

We can summarize this line of thinking in the Argument from the Scientific Test of Reality:

1. If science cannot verify the existence of X, then the best evidence tells us that X does not exist.
2. Science cannot verify the existence of objective moral values.

3. Therefore, the best evidence tells us that objective moral values do not exist.

This argument reflects a basic commitment to the idea that the supernatural does not exist, and that everything in the world can ultimately be explained by science. Since scientific investigation does not tell us whether actions are moral or immoral, good or evil, this seems to leave objective morality out in the cold.

Ethical objectivists have offered two replies to this argument. The first reply accepts premise 1, but rejects 2. Those who adopt this strategy believe that science is the ultimate test of reality, and also believe that morality can pass scientific muster. Other objectivists are doubtful of that, and so reject premise 1. Let's consider these in turn.

Many objectivists are so impressed with science and its potential for illuminating the nature of our world that they insist that morality be scientifically respectable. Such objectivists must therefore find a place for moral values within a scientific world.

They do this by arguing that moral features are nothing other than ordinary, run-of-the-mill qualities that science can tell us about. We use a different vocabulary to refer to them—we talk of good and evil, right and wrong, rather than neutrinos and quarks and molecules and proteins. But the words we use are not important. What is important is that, as these thinkers see it, the natural world is the only world there is. So moral features must be part of that world if they are to exist. This kind of view is called moral naturalism.

Moral naturalists could claim, for instance, that being morally right is nothing other than maximizing happiness, or that being good is the very same thing as being desired. We can use scientific means to check whether happiness is maximized, or whether people really desire things. On this view, moral features are nothing but a special class of scientific features. There isn't anything mysterious about them. Moral naturalists thus reject premise 2 of the argument, because they think that moral features just are natural (that is, not supernatural) features of our world.

If that is right, then moral values will need to pass the Occam's razor test of reality. Recall that this test tells us that we have reason to believe in things only if they are essential to explaining things. That's why we no longer believe in ghosts (or the tooth fairy or Superman). We have reason to think that physical objects like buildings or apples or planes are real, because their existence best explains why we see and taste and hear what we do.
But are moral features really needed to explain anything? Naturalists say yes. They think, for instance, that Stalin's evil nature is what explains his sending millions to their death in prison camps. The wrongness of slavery explains why slaves and abolitionists opposed it. The injustice of child abuse explains our anger when we learn of it, the child's resentment, and our efforts to protect children from it.

Many are doubtful that we really need to rely on moral features to explain the goings-on of our world. They think, for instance, that we don't need to refer to Stalin's evil nature in order to explain why so many ended up in the Gulag. Instead, we can refer to his beliefs, fears, plans, and desires to explain why he undertook such actions. We could morally evaluate such things if we like, but that wouldn't be essential to explaining why Stalin did what he did. Moral features are wholly optional and unnecessary when trying for the best, most rigorous explanation of why we act as we do, and have the experiences we have.

Objectivists who share these doubts about naturalism thus accept premise 2 of the current argument. They agree that science cannot verify the existence of objective moral values. These objectivists must therefore criticize premise 1, and its claim that science is the ultimate measure of reality.

Their best strategy is to draw our attention to the fact that moral features are normative features. Normative features are those that tell us how things ought to be, or how we should behave. They rely on norms: standards of behavior that supply us with ideals or requirements.

The basic idea behind rejecting premise 1 is this. Science tells us how things really are. Science does not tell us how things ought to be. Science describes; morality prescribes. Science has its limits. It is out of its depth when trying to tell us about our ultimate purpose, the goals we ought to aim for, the standards we should live by. Science can tell us a lot. But it can't tell us everything.

There is some reason to deny that science really does have the final word on everything. Consider this:

(T) A claim is true only if science can verify it.

(T) can't be true. For science cannot verify it. (T) is not a scientific statement. We cannot test its truth by analyzing what we see, hear, taste, feel, or smell. We cannot mathematically test it. There are no lab experiments that will confirm it.

Since (T) is false, it follows that there are some truths that science cannot confirm. Perhaps moral ones are among them.

Now consider this principle:

(B) You are justified in believing a claim only if science can confirm it.

(B) is also problematic, since science cannot confirm it. Only philosophy can do that. If we take (B) at face value, then by its own lights we cannot be justified in thinking that it is true. So we are not justified in thinking that science is the source of all truths.

This line of reply does not prove that objective moral values exist. But if successful, it does show that science cannot have the final say about everything. This means that at least some nonscientific claims are true, and perhaps highly credible. Moral claims may be among them.

Conclusion

Our discussion of these ten arguments has not revealed a single one that confirms the existence of objective moral values. That was deliberate. I had given over the previous two chapters to the critics of objectivism, and showed how each of the anti-objectivist theories encounters some serious problems.

It's only fair, then, that we devote some time to the many worries that people have about how morality could possibly be objective. I have tried here to outline the ones that are either very popular or very threatening. The most popular ones actually seem easiest to handle. The less well known arguments strike me as more difficult to rebut.

There is no quick, knockdown argument that will demolish ethical objectivism. Nor is there any short and sweet proof of its truth. I have offered these arguments, and their replies, not in order to create the impression of a victory for either side, but rather to give you a sense of how complicated things can get in this area of philosophy. Those who act as if moral skepticism were obviously true, or just plainly false, have simply gotten it wrong. Matters here, as elsewhere in ethics, are too challenging to admit of pat and easy solutions.

Discussion Questions

1. How might one be an ethical objectivist without being intolerant or dogmatic?
2. What is the best explanation of the existence of widespread disagreement in ethics? Does the existence of disagreement suggest a lack of objective moral truth?

3. What are categorical reasons? Do any categorical reasons exist? If not, does this undermine the claim that morality is objective?

4. Do you think that it is possible to make a moral judgment, but to be completely unmotivated to act on it? How does this question bear on the matter of morality's objectivity?

5. At the end of the day, do you believe that morality is objective? What do you think is the strongest argument in favor of your position?

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Most of the topics covered in these pages are also represented in the companion volume to this book, The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press). That book provides selections of original work by other philosophers. I chose the pieces there with an eye to the introductory student, so most of the material should be fairly accessible to those just beginning their philosophical studies. If you want a relatively short collection that ranges over the main issues discussed here, plus a lot of coverage of specific moral problems, such as abortion, the death penalty, and animal rights, then that might be a good place to start.*

An excellent source for the entire range of philosophical issues, not just those in ethics, is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, a free online resource containing articles written by experts in the field: http://plato.stanford.edu/. The articles are usually pitched to those with little prior knowledge of the topic under discussion.

There are a number of other texts designed to introduce students to the field of moral philosophy. Among the better ones are the following: James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 6th ed. (McGraw-Hill 2009); Mark Timmons, Moral Theory (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); and Julia Driver, Ethics: The Fundamentals (Blackwell, 2006). Of these, the Rachels and Rachels book is best suited for those with

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* All sources that appear in boldface in this section are included in The Ethical Life.
no philosophy background. The Driver and the Timmons books are a bit more advanced.

Three very good anthologies provide fairly accessible survey articles of the major theories in and about ethics. One of these is A Companion to Ethics (Blackwell, 1991), edited by Peter Singer. Another is The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory (Blackwell, 2000), edited by Hugh LaFollette. The last is The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (Oxford University Press, 2007), edited by David Copp. The Encyclopedia of Ethics (Garland, 1992), edited by Lawrence and Charlotte Becker, is available in most college and university libraries and offers entries on all of the topics covered in this book.

Hedonism

Epicurus's works are available in many editions. A reliable and well-priced version is The Epicurus Reader, edited by L. Gerson and B. Inwood (Hackett, 1994). His Letter to Menoeceus, included in that collection, summarizes the main doctrines of his philosophy. W. D. Ross's two-worlds objection to hedonism can be found in The Right and the Good (Oxford University Press, 1930), chapter 5. Robert Nozick's experience machine discussion can be found in his Anarchy, State, and Utopia (Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45. John Stuart Mill's version of hedonism is presented in chapters 2 and 4 of Utilitarianism (many publishers). Jeremy Bentham's version of hedonism can be found in his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1781), available from many publishers. Perhaps the most sophisticated contemporary defense of hedonism is offered by Fred Feldman in his very clearly written Pleasure and the Good Life (Oxford University Press, 2006). A defense of the view that informed and autonomous happiness is the key to a good life is given by L. W. Sumner in his Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1995). His book also provides a nice overview of the issues surrounding the nature of the good life.

A very accessible, engaging work for introductory students is Joel Kupperman's Six Myths about the Good Life (Hackett, 2006), which covers hedonism, the desire theory, and other options not discussed here. Those who want more in the way of short selections from classic texts in this area might consult The Good Life, edited by Charles Guignon (Hackett, 1999). On hedonism and happiness more generally, see Nicholas White's historical survey A Brief History of Happiness (Blackwell, 2006), and Steven Cahn and Christine Vitrano's anthology Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Getting What You Want


Morality and Religion

Plato's Euthyphro is available in many translations. At about eleven pages, it's an enjoyable introduction to Plato's early work. Perhaps your best bet is to get it packaged with four other Platonic dialogues in an excellent, inexpensive translation by G. M. A. Grube and John Cooper, Five Dialogues (Hackett, 2001).
Defenses of the divine command theory tend to be fairly complex and difficult. A pretty accessible version is by the late Philip Quinn, in his article on the theory in Hugh LaFollette's (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* (2000). Robert Adams is another notable defender of the theory. His work is not easy for the beginner, but “A New Divine Command Theory,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1979): 66–79, might not be a bad place to start. A more accessible version of this paper is given in an anthology that I have edited, which ranges across most areas of ethics: *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2011).

Though it focuses on many other issues as well, *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* (Oxford University Press, 2004), written by William Lane Craig (the Christian) and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (the atheist), also contains some common lines of defense and criticism surrounding the divine command theory. It is written in a very lively style. Accessible assessments of the divine command theory can be found in most of the introductory books mentioned in the “Where to Start” section at the beginning of Suggestions for Further Reading. A critical discussion of the divine command theory that is quite easy to read can be found in Erik Weilenberg’s *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 2. Kai Nielsen’s *Ethics without God* (Prometheus, 1990) is a clear treatment of a number of issues regarding religion and morality, written from the perspective of someone who thinks that ethics is self-standing and has no need of religious input.

**Natural Law**

The attempt to base morality on human nature can be traced in the West all the way to Aristotle. His *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially books I and II, are the place to start. A fine and helpful translation is offered by Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999, 2nd ed.). Medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas, whose work continues to exercise the largest influence on Roman Catholic moral theology, is the essential source for thinking about developments of natural law over the past 700 years. Aquinas isn’t that approachable; you could dip a toe into the water by having a look at Question 94 of the Prima Secundae of his *Summa Theologica*. The *Summa* runs to five volumes and over a thousand pages, but this discussion can be found in almost every shorter collection of Aquinas’s works. A good book for beginners is *Aquinas: Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1999), edited by Ralph McInerny.

Important contemporary natural lawyers include John Finnis, whose *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980) did much to revive this ethical tradition within secular academic circles. A good scholarly history can be found in Knud Haakonssen’s *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). *Philippa Foot’s Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001) is a delightfully written book by a very important moral philosopher.

**Psychological Egoism**

Though it is nowadays the subject of some debate among scholars, it seems that Thomas Hobbes committed himself to psychological egoism in several passages of his masterpiece, *Leviathan*. This work is available from many publishers; if you have an ear for seventeenth-century English, you will love Hobbes’s vigorous style. Joseph Butler, an eighteenth-century bishop, produced criticisms of psychological egoism that many still regard as decisive. See his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, the relevant portions of which are presented in *Five Sermons* (Hackett, 1983), edited by Stephen Darwall. David Hume, a master stylist himself, also criticized psychological egoism in appendix 2 of his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, available from many publishers.


**Ethical Egoism**

What I have called “The Best Argument for Ethical Egoism” can be pieced together from claims made by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. The claim that we have reason to do only what will serve self-interest is defended by David Gauthier in his important (but difficult) book *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 2. A crystal-clear
historical survey of this thesis about reasons is given in Robert Shaver's *Rational Egoism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Ayn Rand has defended ethical egoism in many of her books. An accessible and short version of her influential views can be found in her article "The Ethics of Emergencies," reprinted in her collection *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Penguin, 1963).


**Consequentialism**

John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* is the place to start. It is short and elegant; many editions are available. Perhaps the greatest utilitarian treatise ever written is Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* (1907; also available from many publishers). Sidgwick's writing style does not endear him to the reader, however—especially the introductory reader. R. M. Hare's writing style, by contrast, is clean and elegant; his sophisticated defense of utilitarianism can be found in his *Moral Thinking* (Oxford University Press, 1981).


There are several good collections of articles and book excerpts on the subject of consequentialism. The contents usually reflect work being done by and for fellow philosophers, so the going isn't always easy. Perhaps the one that contains the greatest bang for the buck for the introductory student is Jonathan Glover's *Utilitarianism and Its Critics* (Prentice Hall, 1990). Samuel Scheffler's *Consequentialism and Its Critics* (Oxford University Press, 1988) contains many fine articles, but the going is sometimes quite difficult. Stephen Darwall does a nice job collecting classic readings and important contemporary ones in his *Consequentialism* (Blackwell, 2002).

**Kantian Ethics**

Kant's writing is not at all easy to work through. The most accessible (or rather, least inaccessible) of his works is also the shortest: *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. It comes in at a bit under sixty pages; parts 1 and 2 (there are three parts in all) can occasionally be read with pleasure and ready comprehension. The best translation is offered by Mary Gregor, with an excellent introduction by Christine Korsgaard (Cambridge University Press, 1998). The translations of Lewis White Beck and H. G. Paton are also good. Paul Guyer's *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Reader's Guide* (Continuum, 2007) is a helpful book to have by one's side when reading this classic text. For the intrepid reader who wants more Kant than this, try his *Metaphysics of Morals*, also translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996).


**Social Contract Theory**

Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is the place to start. For those with only a relatively short amount of time on their hands, go directly to chapters
A very interesting piece that renewed interest in the DDE and DDA is Philippa Foot's "Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5–15. Foot introduced the now-famous trolley problem to the philosophy literature, as well as numerous other examples that have stimulated philosophical discussion for the past several decades. See also Judith Jarvis Thomson's articles "The Trolley Problem" and "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem," both reprinted in her marvelous collection *Rights, Restitution, and Risk* (Harvard University Press, 1986). Thomson introduces a number of important variations on Foot's example and argues for anticonsequentialist principles meant to explain why it is only sometimes, and not always, permitted to minimize harm.

Stephen Darwall's collection, *Deontology* (Blackwell, 2002), contains a number of important papers that explore the idea that certain kinds of actions are intrinsically right or wrong, and discuss the question of whether there are any absolute moral rules.


## Virtue Ethics

Study of virtue ethics must begin with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Many good translations are available. In addition to the one by Terence Irwin, mentioned in the "Natural Law" section, the one undertaken by our old friend W. D. Ross, the preeminent Aristotle scholar of his day, is also excellent. It has been updated by J. O. Urmson and J. L. Ackrill (Oxford University Press, 1998). Christopher Rowe has also provided a fine translation, aided by Sarah Broadie's substantial and illuminating notes, in their edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
FR-10 Suggestions for Further Reading

The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Blackwell, 2006), edited by Richard Kraut, is highly recommended. It includes instructive articles on many important aspects of Aristotle's ethical thought by a who's who of leading scholars.

The best short overview of virtue ethics that I have read is by Julia Annas, in her contribution to David Copp's The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Two excellent collections on virtue ethics are Stephen Darwall, ed., Virtue Ethics (Blackwell, 2002), and Michael Slote and Roger Crisp, eds., Virtue Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1997).


The Ethics of Feminism

A good place to start is Hilde Lindemann's An Invitation to Feminist Ethics (McGraw-Hill, 2006), written with nonphilosophers and beginning students in mind. Its first chapter provides a nice, brief overview of feminist ethics, while chapter 4 offers a succinct review of feminist criticisms of utilitarianism, Kantianism, and contractarianism. But the entire book is worth a read.

Those with an interest in the ethics of care should start with Carol Gilligan's fascinating In a Different Voice (Harvard University Press, 1982), and proceed to Nel Noddings' Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (University of California Press, 1984). Two recent studies by important philosophers are Michael Slote's The Ethics of Care and Empathy (Routledge, 2007) and Virginia Held's The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global (Oxford University Press, 2007). Those who want a much briefer, but still substantial treatment of the subject, would do well to have a look at Held's "The Ethics of Care," in The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (Oxford University Press, 2007), edited by David Copp.


For a taste of the many moral issues that receive fresh light when seen from a feminist perspective, you might try Feminist Philosophies (Prentice Hall, 1992), edited by Janet Kourany, James Sterba, and Rosemary Tong. Cheshire Calhoun's collection, Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers (Oxford University Press, 2004), includes essays by a roster of outstanding philosophers writing on issues in and around feminist philosophy.

The Status of Morality

Most of the work done in metaethics is not that accessible for beginning students. I have written a very elementary introduction to metaethics, titled Whatever Happened to Good and Evil? (Oxford University Press, 2004), designed for those with no prior philosophy knowledge. Robert Audi's Moral Value and Human Diversity (Oxford University Press, 2007) is also pitched to an introductory audience. For a more advanced treatment, Alexander Miller's An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics (Polity, 2004) is a valuable resource. A historically informed survey of views on the topic is given by Stephen Darwall in his Philosophical Ethics (Westview, 1997).

The early chapters of Book III of David Hume's Treatise of Human Nature have set the terms of the debate in metaethics for the past two and a half centuries. Hume's work has inspired important contemporary philosophers such as Gilbert Harman, whose own engagingly written introduction to ethics, The Nature of Morality (Oxford University Press, 1977), contains (in its first two chapters) the most influential version of the Argument from the Scientific Test of Reality, discussed in chapter 21. Harman is also the most prominent contemporary moral relativist. His paper "Moral Relativism Defended," Philosophical Review 85 (1975): 3–22, is worth seeking out. It and four other interesting essays in defense of relativism are included in his Explaining Value (Oxford University Press, 2000).
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


Expressivism entered the scene in the 1930s with chapter 6 of A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic*. This is well worth a read, as Ayer pulls no punches and is a lovely writer. Simon Blackburn’s work is the most accessible among contemporary expressivists, though written with fellow philosophers in mind. His *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford University Press, 1993) contains many important papers. But a better place to start would be his introduction to philosophy, *Think* (Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 8, which is more accessible and written with his characteristic elegance.


For a defense of ethical objectivism that is as clear as philosophical writing gets, see David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). Brink is a moral naturalist whose book offers detailed coverage of most of the major issues in metaethics.

For a wide-ranging collection containing many classic and contemporary writings on the subject, along with a dozen substantial introductory essays designed with the student reader in mind, see Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds., *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2006).

GLOSSARY

Absolute: Never permissibly broken; violating an absolute moral rule is always wrong.

Act consequentialism: The normative ethical theory that says that an act is morally right just because it produces the best actual or expected results.

Act utilitarianism: The version of act consequentialism that says that only well-being is intrinsically valuable, and so says that an act is morally right just because it maximizes overall well-being.

Ad hominem attack: An attempt to undermine the position of an opponent by criticizing his motives or character.

Agnostics: Those who suspend judgment on the question of whether God exists.

Altruism: The direct care and concern to improve the well-being of someone other than yourself.

Ambiguous: Having two or more meanings.

Amoralists: Those who do not care about living up to the moral views they sincerely hold.

Argument: Any chain of thought in which premises are enlisted in support of a particular conclusion.

Atheism: The belief that God does not exist.

Autonomy: The capacity to determine for yourself the principles that you will live by. It can also refer to your ability to live according to your own plan of life.

Begging the question: Arguing on the basis of a reason that will appeal only to people who already accept the argument’s conclusion.

Categorical imperative: A command of reason that requires a person’s obedience regardless of whether such obedience gets him anything he wants.

Categorical reason: A reason to do something that applies to a person regardless of her desires.
Circular reasoning: Defending some belief by a set of other beliefs whose justification ultimately traces back to the original claim in question.

Coherentism: The view that we are justified in believing a claim to the extent that it supports, and is supported by, other beliefs we hold.

Conceptual truth: A true claim that can be known just by understanding it. Such a claim is true just by virtue of the concepts it contains—that’s why understanding it enables one to know it. An example: bachelors are unmarried men.

Consent, tacit: See tacit consent.

Consequentialism: A family of normative ethical theories that share the idea that the morality of actions, policies, motives, or rules depends on their producing the best actual or expected results. See also: act consequentialism, rule consequentialism, act utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism.

Continent: Doing the right thing while suppressing desires that tempt one away from doing one’s duty.

Contractarianism: See social contract theory.

Cultural relativism: The view that an act is morally right just because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals.

Decision procedure: Any method designed to guide us in successfully deliberating about what to do.

Deist: One who believes that God exists, created the universe, and then refrained from becoming involved in human affairs.

Desire satisfaction theory: A theory of human well-being that claims that the satisfaction of your actual or informed desires is necessary and sufficient to improve your welfare.

Divine Command Theory: The view that an act is morally required just because it is commanded by God, and immoral just because God forbids it.

Doctrine of Doing and Allowing (DDA): The view that it is always morally worse to do harm than to allow that same harm to occur.

Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE): The view that if your goal is worthwhile, you are sometimes permitted to act in ways that foreseeably cause certain harms, though you must never intend to cause those harms.

Dogmatism: The trait of being closed-minded and unreasonably confident of the truth of one’s views.

Empirical truth: A true claim that can be known only by means of evidence gained through the senses. Understanding what such a claim says is not enough to know whether it is true—you have to check the claim “against the world” to test it. An example: the Empire State Building is 1453 feet tall.

Error theory: The metaethical view that there are no moral features in this world; no moral judgments are true; our sincere moral judgments try, and always fail, to describe the moral features of things; and there is no moral knowledge.

Ethical egoism: The normative ethical theory that says that actions are morally right just because they maximize self-interest.

Ethical monism: The view that there is only one moral rule that is absolute and fundamental.

Ethical objectivism: The view that there is at least one objective moral standard.

Ethical particularism: The view that there are neither any absolute nor any prima facie moral rules. According to ethical particularism, no feature of the world is always morally relevant, and none is always morally decisive.

Ethical pluralism: The view that there are at least two, and possibly more, fundamental moral rules.

Ethical relativism: The view that correct moral standards are relative to individual or cultural commitments. Ethical relativism can take two forms: cultural relativism or ethical subjectivism.

Ethical subjectivism: The view that an act is morally right just because (a) I approve of it, or (b) my commitments allow it. An action is wrong just because (a) I disapprove of it, or (b) my commitments forbid it.

Eudaimonia: The state of living well; happiness, or flourishing.

Evaluative beliefs: Beliefs that evaluate something, and so assess it as good or bad, virtuous or vicious, and so on.

Exemplar, moral: See moral exemplar.

Exemplary punishment: Punishment designed to make an example of the one who is punished.

Expressivism: The version of moral nihilism that denies that there are any moral features in this world; claims that there is nothing for moral judgments to be true of; and analyzes moral judgments as expressions of emotions, orders, or commitments, none of which are the sorts of things that can be true or false.

Fact-value distinction: The view that there is a sharp difference between facts and values; value claims are not factual, and so cannot be true.

Feminist ethics: A family of theories that emphasize the moral equality of women, and the importance of attending to women’s experience in the development of moral ideas and ideals.

Fidelity: Being faithful to one’s word; keeping one’s promises.

Fitness: The level of an organism’s ability to survive and reproduce.

Free-rider problem: A situation in which people are able to obtain a share of some common good without contributing to it. In such situations, it appears to be rational (if your withholding can go unnoticed) to refrain from contributing, thus enjoying the good at no expense to yourself. The problem is that if enough people act rationally, then there will not be enough resources to produce the relevant good, thus harming everyone.

Fundamental: A moral rule is fundamental just in case its justification does not depend on any more general or more basic moral rule.
Golden rule: The normative ethical principle that says that your treatment of others is morally acceptable if and only if you would be willing to be treated in exactly the same way.

Good will: The ability to reliably determine what your duty is, and a steady commitment to do your duty for its own sake.

Hedonism: The view that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable, and pain (or unhappiness) is the only thing that is intrinsically bad.

Hypothetical imperative: A command of reason that requires a person to take the needed means to getting what she wants.

Iconoclasts: People whose views differ radically from the conventional wisdom of their society.

Ideal observers: Those (probably imaginary) people who are fully informed, perfectly rational, and otherwise perfectly suited to determine the content of morality.

Imperative, categorical: See categorical imperative.

Imperative, hypothetical: See hypothetical imperative.

Individual relativism: See ethical subjectivism.

Infinite regress: An unending series of claims, each of which justifies a previous one and requires justification by a subsequent one. Because the chain never ends, none of the claims within it is ultimately justified.

Innate: Congenital. Innate traits are inborn traits, as opposed to traits that are acquired after birth.

Instrumental goods: Those things whose value consists in the fact that they help to bring about other good things. Examples include vaccinations, mothballs, and money.

Intrinsic values: Those things that are good in and of themselves, considered entirely apart from any good results they may cause. It is controversial which things are intrinsically valuable, but happiness, desire satisfaction, virtue, and knowledge are frequently mentioned candidates.

Lex talionis: The law of retaliation, the principle that says that a wrongdoer deserves to be treated just as he treated his victim.

Logical validity: The feature of an argument that indicates that its premises logically support its conclusion. Specifically, an argument is logically valid just because its conclusion must be true if its premises were all true. Another way to put this: logically valid arguments are those in which it is impossible for all premises to be true while the conclusion is false.

Maxim: A principle of action that you give to yourself. It contains your intended action and the reason you are doing it.

Metaethics: The area of ethical theory that asks about the status of normative ethical claims. It asks, for instance, about whether such claims can be true and, if so, whether personal, cultural, or divine opinion makes them true (or none of the above). It also considers issues about how to gain moral knowledge (if we can), and whether moral requirements give us reasons to obey them.

Metaphysics: The branch of philosophy that discusses the nature of reality, what exists, and what does not exist.

Monism, ethical: See ethical monism.

Moral agent: One who can guide his or her behavior by means of moral reasoning, and so someone who is fit for praise or blame.

Moral community: The set of those beings whose interests are intrinsically important. Membership signifies that you are owed respect, that you have moral rights, that others owe you moral duties for your own sake.

Moral exemplar: Someone of outstanding moral character; someone who can serve as a proper moral role model.

Moral luck: A case in which the morality of an action or a decision depends on factors outside of our control.

Moral naturalism: The view that moral features are natural (i.e., not supernatural) features, whose existence can be confirmed by means of the natural sciences.

Moral nihilism: The form of moral skepticism that says that the world contains no moral features, and so there is nothing for moral claims to be true of. Its two major forms are the error theory and expressivism.

Moral skepticism: The view that there are no objective moral standards. Moral skepticism is also sometimes taken to refer to the view that we can have no moral knowledge.

Moral worth: The praiseworthy feature of an action that fulfills one's moral duty.

Natural law theory: The normative ethical view that says that actions are right if and only if they are natural, and wrong if and only if they are unnatural; people are good to the extent that they fulfill their true nature, bad insofar as they do not.

Nonmaleficence: Not harming others.

Norm: A standard of evaluation. Norms tell us how we should or ought to behave. They represent a measure that we are to live up to.

Normative ethics: The area of ethical theory focused on identifying which kinds of actions are right and wrong, examining the plausibility of various moral rules, and determining which character traits qualify as virtues and which as vices.

Normative features: Those features that tell us how things ought to be, or how we should behave. They rely on norms to do this.

Objective moral duties: Those moral requirements that apply to people regardless of their opinions about such duties, and independently of whether fulfilling such duties will satisfy any of their desires.

Objective theory of well-being: There are many such theories, all sharing a common feature—they claim that certain things are good for people whether or not they believe them to be and whether or not such things satisfy a person's actual or informed desires.

Occam's razor: The instruction never to multiply entities beyond necessity. In the context of selecting from among competing theories, it tells us to choose that theory that can explain as much as any other, while making the fewest assumptions.
Omniscient: All-knowing.
Optimific: Producing the best possible results.
Optimific social rule: A rule whose general acceptance within a society would yield better results than any other such rule.
Paternalism: The policy of treating mature people as if they were children. More specifically, it is a policy of limiting someone's liberty, against his will, for his own good.
Pluralism, ethical: See ethical pluralism.
Premise: Any reason that is used within an argument to support a conclusion.
Prima facie duty: A permanent, excellent but nonabsolute reason to do (or refrain from) a certain type of action.
Principle of Humanity: Kant's thesis that one must always treat a human being (oneself included) as an end, and never as a mere means.
Principle of Universalizability: Kant's thesis that an act is morally acceptable if, and only if, its maxim is universalizable.
Principle of utility: The ultimate utilitarian moral standard, which says that an action is morally right if and only if it does more to improve overall well-being than any other action you could have done in the circumstances.
Prisoner's dilemma: A situation in which everyone involved would be better off by reducing his or her pursuit of self-interest.
Proceduralism: The view that says that we must follow a certain procedure in order to determine which actions are morally right, or which moral claims are true.
Psychological egoism: The view that all human actions are motivated by self-interest, and that altruism is impossible.
Punishment, exemplary: See exemplary punishment.
Punishment, vicarious: See vicarious punishment.
Relativism, cultural: See cultural relativism.
Relativism, individual: See ethical subjectivism.
Rule consequentialism: The normative ethical theory that says that actions are morally right just because they would be required by an optimific social rule.
Rule utilitarianism: The version of rule consequentialism that says that well-being is the only thing of intrinsic value.
Self-evident: A claim is self-evident just in case it is true, and adequately understanding it is enough to make you justified in believing it. The best candidates for self-evident claims are conceptual truths.
Self-regarding actions: Actions that affect only oneself.
Social contract theory: A view in political philosophy that says that governmental power is legitimate if and only if it would be accepted by free, equal, and rational people intent on selecting principles of cooperative living. Also, a view in normative ethical theory that says that actions are morally right if and only if they are permitted by rules that free, equal, and rational people would agree to live by, on the condition that others obey these rules as well.

Soundness: A special feature of some arguments. Sound arguments are ones that (1) are logically valid, and (2) contain only true premises. This guarantees the truth of their conclusions.
Standard of rightness: A rule that gives conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for determining whether actions (or other things) are morally right.
State of nature: A situation in which there is no central authority with the exclusive power to enforce its will on others.
Strictly conscientious action: Action motivated by the thought or the desire to do one's duty for its own sake, rather than from any ulterior motive.
Supererogation: Praiseworthy actions that are above and beyond the call of duty.
Tacit consent: Agreement that is expressed through silence or inaction.
Theist: One who believes that God exists.
Universalizability: The feature of a maxim that indicates that every rational person can consistently act on it. Here is the three-part test for a maxim's universalizability: (1) carefully frame the maxim; (2) imagine a world in which everyone shares and acts on that maxim; (3) determine whether the goal within the maxim can be achieved in such a world. If so, the maxim is universalizable. If not, it isn't.
Validity: See logical validity.
Value theory: The area of ethics concerned with identifying what is valuable in its own right, and explaining the nature of well-being.
Veil of ignorance: An imaginary device that removes all knowledge of one's social, economic, and religious positions; one's personality traits; and other distinguishing features. It is designed to ensure that the important choices of social contractors are made fairly.
Vicarious punishment: The deliberate punishment of innocent victims, designed to deter third parties.
Vicious: Possessed of many vices. The opposite of virtuous.
Virtue ethics: A normative ethical theory that says that an action is morally right just because it would be done by a virtuous person acting in character.