A Free Introduction to Moral Philosophy

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About this Ebook

This ebook is still in the rough draft stage and it has not been sufficiently edited. It is made up of essays written on my philosophy website, Ethical Realism.

My free ebooks are available here that offer many of my thoughts involving philosophy.

Updates:

1. September 23, 2010: I made minor changes involving formatting and the inclusion of page numbers.
2. May 31, 2011: I added a lot to the chapter on Normative Moral Theories and added new chapters on the nature of morality (the meaning of "morality," the debate over moral realism, meta-ethical theories, and uncontroversial moral beliefs.
3. September 3, 2011: I made several corrections and clarifications to the early chapters.

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Preface

This book not only debunks many common myths about morality, but it introduces rational moral thinking and a philosophical understanding of moral reasoning. If we want to know what really matters in the world, if abortion should be legal, or if homosexuality is wrong, we should study moral philosophy and learn to think like a moral philosopher.

This ebook is divided into the following three parts:

1. I discuss the nature of morality.
2. I discuss how to become good and moral reasoning. Once we realize that we are morally flawed just like everyone else, we should find out how we can improve ourselves. This has a theoretical component that philosophers specialize in—moral reasoning. We should find out how to reason about morality without the flaws of everyday moral thinking. We can't try to do the right thing if we don't even know what it is, and we learn about right and wrong using moral reasoning. Thinking like a moral philosopher can help us understand right from wrong in order to help us determine what counts as right or wrong.
3. I discuss applied ethics—I apply moral reasoning to various topics. Once we know how to think like a moral philosopher we can try to determine if something is right or wrong. For example, atheism, homosexuality, and Islam are three things people commonly disapprove of, but are they really immoral?

I. Introduction

This book introduces *moral philosophy*. There are three major areas of moral philosophy:

1. **Meta-ethics** – Research concerning the nature of morality. It tries to answer question, such as: What does "good," "right," or "justice" mean? What makes something good or right? Is moral realism true? Is morality irreducible, cognitive, or overriding? Do intrinsic values exist?
2. **Normative theory** – How do we decide if something is right or wrong?
3. **Applied ethics** – Is *x* right or wrong? (e.g. Is capital punishment right or wrong?)

In this first section I will discuss the nature of morality including what morality is about and the characteristics of morality. Ethics is the "philosophy of morality" and "meta-ethics" is the study of moral reality, moral knowledge, moral language, and moral psychology. It investigates the question, "What's moral philosophy all about?" And many other related question, such as theses:

1. What does 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' and 'wrong,' or 'justice' refer to?
2. Are any moral judgments true?
3. Are there moral facts?
4. Are any moral beliefs rational or justified?
5. Can we attain moral knowledge?
6. How do we know when a moral judgment is probably true or rationally justified?
7. Does anything have intrinsic value (value just for existing), or are all values based on our personal desires and interests?

Chapter 1: What is "Morality?"

People discuss morality quite often and many of our actions are based on assumptions about morality. I will discuss the meaning of "morality" within ordinary language and illustrate the difference between morality and everything else by comparing moral and nonmoral standards.

What does "morality" mean?

Morality involves what we ought to do, right and wrong, good and bad, values, justice, and virtues. Morality is taken to be important; moral actions are often taken to merit praise and rewards, and immoral actions are often taken to merit blame and punishment.

What we ought to do – What we morally ought to do is what's morally preferable. It's morally preferable to give to certain charities and to refrain from hurting people who make us angry; so we morally ought to do these things.

Sometimes what we ought to do isn't seen as "optional." Instead, we often think we have moral *duties* (obligations). It might not be a moral duty to give to any charities, but it seems likely that we often have a duty not to hurt people.

Nonetheless, what we ought to do doesn't just cover our obligations. It's possible to do something morally preferable that's not wrong. For example, we can act "above the call of duty." Some actions are heroic, such as when we risk our life to run into a burning building to save a child. Some philosophers call actions that are above the call of duty "supererogatory" rather than "obligatory."

Right and wrong – Something is morally right if it's morally permissible, and morally wrong if it's morally impermissible. For example, it's morally right to help people and give to certain charities,

but morally wrong to kill people indiscriminately.

Good and bad – "Good" and "bad" refer to positive and negative value. Something is morally good if it helps people attain something of positive value, avoid something of negative vale, or has a positive value that merits being a goal. For example, food is good because it is necessary to attain something of positive value because it helps us survive; and our survival could have positive value that merits being a goal. Something is morally bad if it makes it difficult to attain something of positive value, could lead to something of negative value, or has a negative value that merits avoidance. For example, starvation is bad because it could lead to suffering; and suffering could have negative value that warrants its avoidance.

Something has "instrumental moral value" if it is relevant to achieving *moral goals*. Food is instrumentally good because it helps us achieve our goal to survive; and starvation is instrumentally bad when we have a goal to avoid suffering, and starvation makes it more difficult for us to achieve this goal.

We take some of our goals to be *worthy* as "moral goals" *for their own sake* rather than being instrumental *for the sake of something else*. These goals could be taken to be worthy for having positive value (or help us avoid something of negative value)—what Aristotle calls "final ends" or what other philosophers call "intrinsic values."

Imagine that someone asks you why you have a job and you say it's to make money. We can then ask why you want to make money and you can reply that it's to buy food. We can then ask why you want to buy food, and you can reply that it's to survive. At this point you might not have a reason to want to survive other than valuing your existence for its own sake. If not, then we will wonder if you are wasting your time with a job. All of our goals must be justified at some point by something taken to be *worthy* as a goal for its own sake, or its not clear that any of our goals are really justified.

Final ends – Final ends are goals that we think are worthy. Pleasure,

survival, and knowledge are possible examples of goods that should be taken to be promoted as final ends. Some final ends are also meant to help us avoid something of negative value, such as our goals to avoid pain and death. The goals of attaining these goods are "final ends." It is possible that final ends are merely things we *desire* "for their own sake" but some final ends could be better and of greater importance than others. Aristotle thought that our "most final end" or "ultimate end" is happiness and no other good could override the importance of happiness.

Final ends seem relevant to right and wrong. It seems morally right to try to achieve our final ends because they are worthy. All things equal, it seems morally right to try to attain happiness and survive.

Intrinsic values – Intrinsic values are things of positive or negative value that have that value *just for existing*, and some philosophers think Aristotle's *truly worthy* final ends have intrinsic value. The main difference here is that final ends could merely be psychological—what we take to be worthy goals, but a goal has intrinsic value only if it really is worthy. Some people might have "final ends" but actually be wrong about what goals are worthy of being final ends.

We can desire intrinsic values "for their own sake," many think it's *rational* to often try to attain things that are intrinsically good, and whatever is intrinsically good is good no matter who attains it. For example, if human life is intrinsically good, then survival is good for every person.

Intrinsic value plays the same role as final ends—we think it's often *morally right* to try to achieve goals that help people attain intrinsic goods and we *morally ought* to do so. However, intrinsic values can conflict. If pain is intrinsically bad, that doesn't mean we should never allow ourselves or others to experience pain because there might be intrinsic goods that can be attained as a result of our pain. For example, homework and learning is often painful, but the knowledge attained can help us live better lives and could even be intrinsically good for its own sake.

Justice – Justice refers to our interest in certain ethical issues such as equality, fairness, and merit. It is unjust to have slavery or to have different laws for different racial groups because people should be *equal* before the law, it's unfair, and racial groups don't *merit* unequal treatment before the law. It is just to punish all people who break the law equally rather than let certain people—such as the wealthy—break certain laws that other people aren't allowed to break. Additionally, it's unjust to punish the innocent and to find the innocent guilty in a court of law.

Virtues – Some people are better at being moral than others. It's important that we know the difference between right and wrong, attain the skills necessary to reach demanding moral goals, and find the motivation to do what is morally preferable. For example, courage is a virtue that involves knowledge of right and wrong, skills, and motivation. Courage requires us to endanger our personal well being when doing so is morally preferable, to have skills that make it possible to endanger our personal well being in many situations, and to have the motivation to be willing to endanger our well being when we ought to do so.

Praise and blame – We often think that moral behavior merits praise and immoral behavior merits blame. It often seems appropriate to tell people who have done good deeds, such as saving lives, that we appreciate it and that what they are doing is good; and it often seems appropriate to tell people who have done something immoral that we don't appreciate it and that they did something morally wrong. Additionally, it generally seems appropriate to hold people *responsible* for their actions and let them know that their actions could have been different.

Reward and punishment – One way to hold people responsible for their actions is to reward and punish them for their behavior, and this often seems appropriate. We could give gifts or return favors to people who help us, and break our friendship or ignore those who do something immoral. For example, a company that scams people

should be held responsible and punished by consumers who decide to no longer do business with that company.

Sometimes punishments could be severe and could seem immoral in any other context. For example, it might be morally justified to throw murderers in prison even though it would be an immoral example of kidnapping and imprisonment in many other contexts. We can't just throw anyone in prison that we want.

Moral and nonmoral standards

Not everything is morally right or wrong. Sometimes something is entirely nonmoral and irrelevant to morality—such as standing on your head or counting blades of grass. One way to clarify what "morality" refers to is to compare and contrast it to nonmoral things that are sometimes confused with it.

What we morally or nonmorally ought to do – We don't just talk about right and wrong, good or bad, or what we ought to do in moral contexts. This is because there is both moral and nonmoral instrumental value.

1. *Moral instrumental value* – We ought to do what is necessary to attain moral goals. For example, we morally ought to get a job and buy food to stay alive. It's morally right to get a job and buy food, and food has moral instrumental value insofar as it helps us attain our moral goal of survival.
2. *Nonmoral instrumental value* – Not all instrumental value helps us achieve moral goals. We can also have personal goals that have (almost) nothing to do with morality. For example, I might have a goal of standing on my head and taking gymnastics classes could be what I ought to do to achieve this goal. The right thing to do to be able to stand on your head is to take gymnastics classes, even though it has nothing to do with morality. Additionally, some instrumental values could even be immoral. For example, I might have a goal to murder someone

and I could say I *ought* to use a gun if that's the best way to murder someone. That's not to say that I morally ought to murder anyone.

Etiquette – Etiquette tells us how to be polite and show respect within a culture. Etiquette tells us not to chew our food with our mouths open, to open doors for people, and not to interrupt people who are talking. Sometimes being rude and impolite can be morally wrong, but the fact that etiquette and morality sometimes overlap doesn't mean they are identical or that etiquette is always relevant to morality. First, etiquette tends not to be serious enough to be morally relevant. Burping in the US is considered rude, but it would be strange to say it's ever morally wrong. Second, it's often morally right to be rude. Many people think that questioning someone's moral qualifications and moral opinions is rude, but it's often the morally preferable thing to do because it's essential that we have the best moral opinions possible and sometimes it's a good idea to help people improve their moral opinions. The importance of helping people be moral can override the importance of showing the superficial signs of respect assigned within a culture. Such signs of respect are often arbitrary and can conflict with more important ways of showing respect—such as the respect we show people when we assume that people have a concern to morally improve themselves.

Law – The law tells us what we are or are not allowed to do, and breaking the law often leads to punishment. What's legal is often based on what's moral, but not always. For example, it's illegal *and* immoral to murder people. However, the fact that legality and morality can overlap doesn't mean they are identical. It was once illegal to free slaves, but that doesn't mean it was morally wrong; and it can be legal for a company to pollute or dump toxic waste, but that doesn't mean it's morally right to do so.

It's hard to pinpoint what morality is about, but we often discuss morality with ease anyway. There are many related ideas concerning morality, such as what we ought to do, right and wrong, and justice; but these ideas often have a nonmoral counterpart. This seems clear when we compare moral and nonmoral instrumental value. Moreover,

etiquette and law are often confused with morality, but they are not identical to morality. What's polite or legal is often moral, but not always. What's bad etiquette or illegal can be moral as well.

Chapter 2: The Debate Over Moral Realism

The question over *what morality refers to* has led to two groups of philosophers. One group describes itself as being "moral realists" and other other as "moral anti-realists." Moral realists think that there's more to morality than anti-realists. In particular, the moral realists believe that there's at least one moral fact. I will describe these two groups then briefly describe why someone might accept or reject moral realism.

What is Moral realism?

There is no precise definition of moral realism that all philosophers agree to, but moral realists agree that anti-realists are giving incomplete meta-ethical theories because moral realists believe in at least one "moral fact." Other than that, moral realists tend to be optimistic about attaining moral knowledge, identifying true moral statements, and often believe in intrinsic values.

Moral facts – The difference between "truth" and "facts" is that statements are true, but facts are the (parts of) reality that at least sometimes make statements true (by corresponding to them). For example, when I say that I have a foot, what I say is true because there's a real foot in the world that's part of my body. However, not all facts are objects like feet. Examples of moral facts *could be* the following:

1. Pain is intrinsically bad.
2. We ought not cause pain without an overriding reason to do so.
3. It's rational to try to avoid causing unnecessary pain to people.
4. It's wrong to torture people without an overriding reason to do so.
5. Socrates was a good person.
6. Socrates had courage.

Facts can be any part of reality, such as objects, properties, relations between things, states of affairs, and events.

1. *Parts of reality* – We assume that things exist in space and time, but not everything is an object. For example, parts of reality can be thoughts or feelings, but thoughts and feelings aren't necessarily objects.
2. *Objects* – Objects are unities that are taken to exist apart from other unities. A foot can be taken to be an object unified and somewhat distinct from our other body parts even though it's technically unified with the rest of our body. It's not entirely clear if any object is truly unified in any meaningful sense because the universe is made up of fields and particles, but it's convenient to talk about objects and we often understand what people say who discuss them.
3. *Properties* – Properties are elements of things, such as length, color, strength, and courage. It's not clear that all properties are really the same kinds of things. Length is a comparison between things, color is how light reflects off of objects; strength is what a body can do; and courage is a relationship between morality, body, and mind that involves bodies doing what is morally praiseworthy because the mind is motivated to do so.
4. *Relations between things* – Objects and things are often interrelated and those relationships can be important to us. The fact that one object in conjunction with the laws of nature can cause something to happen is often very important. For example, we eat food to survive and this involves a complex interrelationship between our bodies, food, and the laws of nature.
5. *States of affairs* – States of affairs are all the facts—the total reality—that's relevant to us when we make a truth claim. One reason we think we should eat food is because the states of affairs including our bodies and the food will undergo a causal process and lead to greater health and longevity.
6. *Events* – States of affairs exist in time and the reality that exists changes from one moment to the next. We often conveniently discuss "events" to pinpoint the parts of reality that change and

interests us. For example, we can speak of the event of a gun being fired or the events that lead to high oil prices.

Are moral facts irreducible? – Moral facts of the moral realist variety can't be eliminated through reduction. We often find out that one thing is actually something else. We often *eliminate* the existence of something through a reduction. For example, we might say that human beings are *nothing but* particles and energy. We could then stop talking about human beings and just talk about certain configurations of particles and energy. Some people also suggest that the mind is *nothing but* the brain.

Some people have suggested that morality is *nothing but* cultural customs, preferences, or a social contract. This is a paradigmatic sort of moral anti-realism. Moral realists require that moral facts are *more than* just cultural customs, preferences, or a social contract.

However, some sorts of reduction are not eliminative. For example, some philosophers think that pain is *identical* to badness, but they don't think we can eliminate pain. They think that pain and badness are two different ways to see the same thing. This is much like how people claim that H_2O is identical to water, but they don't claim that "water doesn't really exist."

Intrinsic value – One good candidate for being a "moral fact" that seems to explain other moral facts is "intrinsic value"—the idea that something could be good or bad just for existing. For example, it can be a fact that (some) pain is intrinsically bad. As a result we might also decide that the following are moral facts:

1. It's wrong to cause people pain indiscriminately.
2. It's appropriate for people to dislike pain and to desire to avoid pain.
3. It's appropriate to be angry at people who cause others pain indiscriminately.
4. It's appropriate to feel guilt, regret, or shame when we *wrongly* cause other people pain.

5. We ought to consider the pain our actions can cause people before deciding on a course of action.
6. It's courageous to be willing to undergo pain (e.g. jump in a burning building) to help many other people avoid pain (e.g. help them out of a burning building).

The relationship between these ideas and intrinsic value involves *instrumental* facts. It's a fact that a person ought to take a gymnastics class to learn to do cartwheels even though there is no object called "rightness" in the world. What makes it right is merely that it's a good *means to an end*—it's a good way for us to accomplish our goals. Similarly, there are better ways than others to promote intrinsic value (or to avoid intrinsically bad consequences).

Moral knowledge – Knowledge implies (at the very least) justified true belief. Moral knowledge of the most controversial kind for a moral realist will include the ability to have justified true beliefs concerning moral facts. Most moral realist philosophers think we can *know* at least one moral fact, and that's not surprising considering how strange it would be to insist that *there's at least one moral fact despite the fact that we can't know what it is.*

It's almost impossible to be absolutely certain when we have knowledge, but the requirement of having a "justified belief" isn't as difficult. The idea of "justification" is that some beliefs are more rational than others. Justified beliefs are sufficiently rational, and unjustified beliefs are irrational. Moral knowledge requires us to have rational moral beliefs, so moral realists agree that morality contains an element of rationality.

How could we have justified beliefs concerning morality? There are at least three ways:

1. *We can assume certain beliefs to be true and use those beliefs to create arguments.* – We might not need an argument for all our beliefs to be justified. We could assume that certain moral beliefs are true until they are proven false or problematic counter-

evidence is attained. This is much like the scientific method that offers hypotheses and successful hypotheses are taken to be true until proven otherwise. However, we must have a way to have counter-evidence against our moral assumptions or it will be impossible to know which moral assumptions are better justified than others.

2. *Through observation.* – Many people think that we can observe moral facts just like scientific facts. It seems likely that we can observe various mental facts, such as our thoughts and feelings, and many people also think we can observe that our pleasure is (often) intrinsically good (good just for existing) and pain is (often) intrinsically bad (bad just for existing).

3. *Through self-evidence.* – Many people think certain facts are self-evident and sufficiently mature people can know they are true through contemplation. Many people agree that "2+2=4" could be known through self-evidence, and perhaps the belief that "torturing people *indiscriminately* is wrong" can also be known once a person understands what "torturing people indiscriminately" and "wrong" consist of.

Finally, many philosophers who believe in "moral knowledge" don't necessarily think we can perfectly model or describe moral facts, have perfectly accurate moral beliefs, or attain certainty. Our language doesn't necessarily correlate with reality perfectly and we generally use words that are convenient and easy to communicate rather than try to model reality perfectly. Scientists try very hard to model reality and have incredibly in-depth knowledge of reality as a result, but even scientists fail to *perfectly* model reality and their theories gain greater precision quite often. A theory is often taken by scientists to be false when a new one with greater precision is successfully tested. In other words knowledge might not quite require *true* beliefs insofar as the word "true" is often taken to refer to perfect precision, but such precision might rarely be possible. (It might be possible in logic and mathematics.)

Is moral realism true?

I will briefly discuss some reasons to accept or reject moral realism.

Why agree with moral realism? – There are at least two main reasons to agree with moral realism:

1. One, we tend to think we know a lot about morality. Moral realism can help explain *how* we can know so much about morality, and moral realism might be needed to explain the actual "moral knowledge" we have. Many make this point by saying that moral realism is *intuitive* or is supported by *common sense*. For example, a moral realist can argue that it's rational to nurture our empathy to care more for others and that might make sense if other people (or their experiences) have intrinsic value, but it's not clear how it can make sense for an anti-realist.
2. Two, moral realists are convinced that anti-realism—the rejection of moral facts—couldn't possibly cover all that there is to morality. They think that anti-realists are missing something. For example, we might think we know that pain is intrinsically bad from personal experience, but facts about intrinsic value imply moral realism. Without intrinsic value it's not clear how any moral belief could be justified, and we regularly engage in moral debate about which moral beliefs are more justified.

Why reject moral realism? – Moral anti-realists often reject moral realism for at least two reasons:

1. First, they think that the moral facts that moral realists believe in are far-fetched and probably don't exist. They might not be convinced that such moral facts are supported by intuition or common sense or they might simply dismiss our intuitions and common sense. For example, some philosophers think that there is no evidence of moral facts, and such facts would be too strange to hypothesize about. Our intuition and common sense is often dismissed for being prejudiced and unwarranted popular opinion, but almost all anti-realists agree we do know quite a bit

about morality, such as the fact that it often makes sense for us to argue about morality.

2. Second, they think that morality can be adequately explained without referring to moral facts. Anti-realists can admit that we make certain moral judgments, but they could explain why we make those judgments without appealing to moral facts. For example, they could argue that people agree that torturing people indiscriminately is wrong because we have empathy for each other and/or we implicitly agree to a social contract that will serve everyone's interests.

There are many different moral realist and anti-realist philosophers who all have somewhat different beliefs concerning the nature of morality. Nonetheless, the debate over moral realism highlights at least two main elements of the nature of morality—moral facts and moral knowledge. We want to know if moral statements can be true because of moral facts, if we can know those facts, if those facts ever refer to intrinsic value, and if any of our moral beliefs are rationally justified.

Chapter 3: Meta-Ethical Theories

Meta-ethical theories are meant to explain moral psychology, moral reality, and moral reason. Moral psychology considers the actual moral judgments, moral interests, and moral motivation people experience. Moral reality refers to the nature behind true moral statements—what makes our statements true. Moral reason describes our moral knowledge and how we can decide which moral beliefs are best or "most likely true." Moral realists believe that there are moral facts (moral elements of reality) and they are often optimistic about how well we can understand such facts, but moral anti-realists reject moral realism and don't think we need moral facts to understand morality. I will briefly discuss five meta-ethical theories, two of which are forms of moral realism and three that are forms of moral anti-realism: Moral naturalism and moral intuitionism are both forms of moral realism; noncognitivism, relativism, and error theory are forms of moral anti-realism. There are many forms of each of these theories, but I will concentrate on one version of each theory.

Moral naturalism

[Moral naturalism](#) states that moral facts are ordinary facts of the same physical reality described by scientists (biology, psychology, and physics), and we know about these facts through observation. Many naturalists think that we can observe moral facts because they are *identical* to other natural facts. For example, pain and intrinsic badness could be identical—two ways to see the same thing. Philosophers argue that scientists discovered that water and H_2O are identical and we can discover that pain and intrinsic badness are the same thing in a similar way.

Many philosophers think that morality supervenes on the natural world in the sense that moral facts depend on natural facts, so our observations about the natural world are relevant to morality. Two identical physical states of affairs will have identical moral

implications. Two different situations of children torturing cats for fun will both be examples of something morally wrong because the natural facts are sufficiently analogous.

Many moral naturalists equate "natural" with "nonmoral," but it's also possible that moral facts are a subclass of natural facts, just like most philosophers now think that psychological facts are natural facts rather than "over and above" natural facts. Many moral naturalists who agree that moral facts can be a subclass of natural facts think we can observe that pain is intrinsically bad just like we can observe our beliefs and desires. Pain is not necessarily identical to intrinsic badness because pain could have a *property* of being intrinsically bad instead.

Objections

1. **The open question argument.** – How do we know when two facts are identical? It's not obvious that pain and "intrinsic badness" are identical because they seem so different. The open question argument makes it clear that no matter what identity relation is offered, we can ask, "But are they identical?" For example, we can say intrinsic badness and pain are identical, and I can feel pain and ask, "But is this pain intrinsically bad?" If no good answer is offered, then such questions imply that moral identity relations are hypotheses at best and have not been proven true.
2. **Moral observation is unreliable.** – Many people question our ability to observe moral facts. First, many such observations seem presumptuous, such as the observation that torturing a cat is wrong from seeing it occur. It might merely be our moral assumptions that are needed to explain such an observation. Additionally, moral observations are *subjective* because not everyone has the same moral observations.

Moral Intuitionism

Moral intuitionists (also known as "moral non-naturalists") think that

observation is insufficient to explain all of our moral knowledge and at least some of our moral knowledge is based on intuition or contemplation that enables us to know self-evident facts. Once we fully understand a moral statement, that can be enough to know if it's true. For example, it might be self-evident that all pain is intrinsically bad to anyone who fully understands what "pain" and "intrinsically bad" refer to. This is much like our knowledge of mathematics and logic. We can know that "2+2=4" just by understanding what the statement is saying.

Moral intuitionists don't necessarily think moral facts are natural because they don't think we can know all moral facts through observation of the natural world. They tend to disagree that moral facts are identical to natural facts.

Objections

1. **Intuition is unreliable.** – Many people have different intuitions and declare different moral beliefs to be "self-evident." It's not obvious that we can resolve this disagreement or that intuition is anything other than prejudice.
2. **Non-natural facts are far fetched.** – Philosophers would prefer for all facts to be part of the natural world and it seems mysterious to say that some facts aren't. Additionally, it's not obvious that there are "non-natural moral facts" in the first place.

Emotivism

Emotivism is a form of "non-cognitivism" because it claims that moral judgments aren't ultimately meant to be true or false. Instead, moral judgments are expressions of our emotions and moral arguments are meant to change someone's emotional attitudes towards certain moral judgments. Not everything we say is true or false, such as "Wow!" or "Do your job!" Emotivists admit that moral judgments often sound like they are assertions, but that is deceptive. They are actually just

emotional displays. Saying "Killing indiscriminately is wrong" is actually expressing something like, "Killing indiscriminately, boo!"

Emotivists don't believe in moral facts or true moral statements, but some emotivists do believe that we can have a conversation involving "fictional" moral ideas that we treat as true for practical purposes. Saying what's right or wrong might help us agree upon what laws to pass and what social contract would best satisfy our interests. Some people call this "fictionalism" or "constructivism."

Objections

1. **Emotivism is counterintuitive.** – It seems highly counterintuitive to tell me that when I engage in arguments concerning morality that I was doing something totally different than I thought. Emotivism is very dismissive of our moral experiences and conscious intentions.
2. **Emotivism ignores rational moral arguments.** – If moral arguments were merely meant to change our emotions, then why do so many moral arguments seem rational? It's not obvious that an emotivist can fully explain why rational moral arguments are so important to so many people.

Moral Relativism

Moral relativism is the view that moral statements can be true or false, but the truth of a moral statement depends on the moral tradition of the person uttering it. Why? Because morality is based on a culture, social contract, or constructed tradition. All moral statements are made within a tradition and the statements are true if they correspond to the tradition. One culture could say that lying is always wrong and another could say it's only wrong some times.

Moral relativists reduce morality to empirically verifiable customs and traditions that can be studied by anthropologists. If you want to know what's right or wrong, just study the culture you live in.

Moral relativists do not need to prove that all cultures disagree about morality because we could all find it most convenient to agree about certain things. For example, we all have an interest to have our life and property protected, so every culture agrees that stealing and killing willy nilly is wrong.

Objections

1. **Some cultures experience moral progress.** – For example, slavery was once considered to be perfectly moral in the US, but now we know it was wrong. If moral realism is true, then we can experience moral progress by discovering new moral facts and finding out that our previous moral beliefs were false. It's not obvious that moral relativists can explain how a culture can improve and correct their false moral beliefs because it's impossible for a culture to have false moral beliefs in the first place.
2. **Relativism fails to account for rational moral arguments.** – We often argue about what's true about morality, but it's not clear that such arguments could amount to more than an appeal to popular opinion for a relativist. However, popular opinion can fail to account for moral truths because people are often wrong (such as when they thought slavery wasn't wrong) and because a culture couldn't have an opinion concerning every possible moral issue. There's new moral issues that crop up every day and the situations we find ourselves in are often very unique.

Error theory

Error theory states that all ordinary moral judgments are false. Both "murder is wrong" and "murder is not wrong" are false because nothing is morally wrong. "Moral wrongness" is non-existent just like unicorns and all statements about things being morally wrong are false for the same reason they are false about unicorns—to say, "Unicorns have four legs" and "unicorns have a tail" are both false because there

are no unicorns.

(There might be statements about morality that are true, but we would have to be careful. For example, an error theorist could say it's true that "'murder is wrong' is false.")

Error theorists agree that when we speak about morality we often intend to say something true or false and refer to moral facts, but they think all moral concepts fail to refer to anything because there are no moral facts. There is no such thing as right or wrong, good or bad, virtue, or intrinsic value.

However, error theorists don't necessarily want to do away with morality or moral arguments. Error theorists agree that we could personally find it beneficial to agree to a social contract and it can be convenient for us to speak *as if* morality is real. This is basically the same position I mentioned earlier called "fictionalism" or "constructivism." This is also true when we speak of unicorns. There's a sense that it's true that unicorns have four legs and a tail when we are speaking within the fictional framework where unicorns exist.

Objections

1. **Morality and self-interest aren't identical** – What's good for me isn't always right. What's in our self-interest and what's moral are often at odds. For example, a cautious and successful thief can steal to help herself while hurting others, and doing so is wrong. However, the error-theorist argues that we only have a reason to be moral and accept morality when it's in our self-interest. This is contrary to the spirit of morality.
2. **Error theory requires us to reject uncontroversial moral truths** – Every meta-ethical theory I've discussed is sensitive to the fact that we can successfully make moral judgments without doing something wrong except the error theorist. It is uncontroversial that we can *appropriately* make moral judgments, such as the judgment that *killing people indiscriminately is wrong*. The error theorist requires us to admit that our understanding of morality

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is almost entirely wrong, but we think we do know quite a bit about morality. Given the choice between saying that "killing people indiscriminately is wrong" *is an appropriate moral judgment* and saying error theory is true, most people will side with our uncontroversial moral judgments. We can argue that we are more confident that certain moral judgments are appropriate than that error theory is true.

We make moral judgments in everyday life quite often. We tend to think such judgments can be true or false, but emotivism states otherwise. We tend to think that such judgments are at least sometimes true, but both emotivism and error theory state otherwise. We tend to think that our moral judgments can be appropriate, but error theory seems to imply otherwise. Nonetheless, even if our moral judgments can be true or appropriate, it's not obvious to everyone why. Each of these meta-ethical theories have a different answer concerning the reality that corresponds to morality, and they all face various objections that must be appropriately dealt with before we can commit to one of them. Additionally, I've previously given two arguments for and against moral realism that should also be dealt with.

Chapter 4: Uncontroversial Moral Beliefs

There are highly plausible uncontroversial moral beliefs, such as the belief that slavery and racism are wrong. These beliefs are important to philosophy because they help justify our theories and arguments. Arguments that are compatible with such beliefs are more plausible than those that conflict with them. I will define "highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs," briefly discuss why such beliefs are important in philosophy, and explain why I think the following six beliefs fit this description:

1. It can be appropriate to love someone to the point of self-sacrifice.
2. It's appropriate to have empathy for all people.
3. Morality is overriding.
4. It's rational to be moral.
5. Morality isn't up to us.
6. Some actions are right and some are wrong.

What are "highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs?"

Highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs are beliefs most moral philosophers agree upon after deliberating about moral philosophy, and many non-philosophers seem to agree that they are probably true. Even though many of us think we can know these beliefs are true, it can be very difficult to explain how we can know they are true.

There are varying degrees that beliefs can be "plausible" and "uncontroversial." "1+1=2" is maximally plausible and uncontroversial, and "it's wrong to kill people in at least some situations" is also extremely plausible but it's at least somewhat less plausible.

Highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs are not always irrefutable or known for certain, but many people think they know they're true. It's

normal to say, "I know I have a hand" or "I know killing people just because they have a certain hair color is wrong" because these beliefs are so plausible and uncontroversial.

"Uncontroversial beliefs" as I use the term are not necessarily agreed upon by everyone, but such beliefs are not irrational and I find the denial of these beliefs to be "counterintuitive" or "absurd." They can be justified through argumentation or they can be justified intuitively.[1]

Highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs are not merely common beliefs. The belief that the Earth is flat was a common belief for thousands of years, but the realization that the world is actually round does not seem absurd or counterintuitive once we realize that the Earth is so large that it only looks flat from close up.

I will henceforth call *highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs* "uncontroversial beliefs" for short.

Why are uncontroversial beliefs important?

Uncontroversial beliefs are important in philosophy. All things equal, theories and arguments that require us to reject uncontroversial beliefs are "revisionary" and are less plausible than theories and arguments that don't. Many good arguments are justified precisely because the conclusion follows from uncontroversial highly plausible premises. For example:

1. Killing people just because they have a certain hair color is wrong.
2. If killing people just because they have a certain hair color is wrong, then killing people just because they red hair is wrong.
3. Therefore, killing people just because they have red hair is wrong.

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1   What is known intuitively is merely known but difficult to justify in words. That doesn't mean it's impossible to justify in words. For example, I find it difficult to prove that "1+1=2" in words, but I think my belief is justified and I think I know that "1+1=2."

Both premises are uncontroversial and highly plausible, which makes the conclusion highly plausible and justified.

Six uncontroversial moral beliefs

1. It can be appropriate to love someone to the point of self-sacrifice. – When I say that something is "appropriate," that means that it's not inappropriate—it's sufficiently justified. When I say something is inappropriate, that means we shouldn't do it and there might be something "irrational" about doing it. First, I will explain how some emotions could be "appropriate." Second, I will explain why self-sacrificial love seems to be appropriate.

(a) Emotions can be appropriate when they are based on justified beliefs.[2] A rational person can have more appropriate emotions. All things equal, a person whose child dies should feel grief as opposed to joy.[3] The loss of a child is usually bad. If a person feels joy because something bad happens, then that person is either insane or they mistakenly think something good has happened. One rule of thumb is "it's appropriate to feel good in proportion the fact that something good has happened, and it's appropriate to feel bad in proportion to the fact that something bad has happened."

Examples of inappropriate emotions include the following:

1. To hate someone for giving you a slice of cake tends to be inappropriate. That action does not usually warrant hatred because hatred only seems warranted by extremely horrific acts and giving someone a slice of cake tends not to be such a horrific act.
2. To love money to the point of murdering people to take their money is inappropriate.

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2 The Stoic philosophers were some of the first people to analyze emotions in terms of reasonable beliefs, and now philosophers discuss how emotions have a "cognitive component." Go here for more information about the Stoics. Go here for more information about cognitivist theories of emotions.

3 There might be unusual circumstances when a person could appropriately be (somewhat) glad when their child dies, but that is not usually the case.

3. To get so angry about a car tailgating you to the point of deciding you should murder that person is inappropriately extreme even though some anger could be warranted by the act.

Examples of appropriate emotions include the following:

1. Being joyous that your friend had a child.
2. Being angry that someone tortured a child.
3. Feeling grief when a loved one dies.

(b) It is appropriate to love someone to the point of self-sacrifice—to the point that no reciprocal benefit can be attained. We often have a loved one and we are willing to provide that person food, shelter, an education, a kidney, or even protect that person though violent resistance to threats. A lot of our loving relationships are reciprocal and we expect to be rewarded from our sacrifices, but not all of them. Sometimes we know that no reward can be expected, but we still make sacrifices for the ones we love. Such love can be inappropriate if the person we love isn't worthy of the love or is only using us, but it seems wrong to say that self-sacrificial love is always inappropriate. There are people we know will die soon who might be unable to reciprocate, but that doesn't mean we should leave them out on the street to starve to death. The elderly who get Alzheimer's disease are one example of a group of people who need to be cared for and can't always reciprocate or appreciate our sacrifices, but they still deserve the care of their loved ones.

If emotions are never appropriate, then we couldn't say that it's ever appropriate to help loved ones with Alzheimer's disease who can't reciprocate our sacrifices. In fact, helping loved ones without any expectation for reciprocation would seem irrational because it wouldn't help fulfill our personal desires. That result seems absurd.

2. It's appropriate to have empathy for all people. – Just like love, empathy often motivates self-sacrifice with no expectation for reciprocal benefit. Whistleblowers, freedom fighters, and activists are often killed for trying to make the world a better place and fight

corruption. Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. are three examples of activists who were murdered for speaking out. These people don't just try to protect their families, they care about strangers and are willing to put their lives at risk to help strangers. That doesn't mean these people are fanatics, fools, or irrational. Having empathy for all people (including strangers) is praiseworthy rather than inappropriate.

Self-sacrifice does not require that we actually die, it merely refers to altruistic acts that cost us something to benefit another. The empathy that our heroes have for strangers might seem unusual, but I think self-sacrificial empathy is normal. If a stranger wants an aspirin to get rid of a headache, then it seems appropriate to give her one. No expectation for reciprocation is required.

If it's not appropriate to have empathy for all people to the point of motivating self-sacrifice, then it's not appropriate to give an aspirin to a stranger and the heroic lives of Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. would not be praiseworthy. Instead, all of these actions would seem irrational based on the fact that they cost them something without an expected personal benefit. That result seems absurd.

3. Morality is overriding. – What morality demands and what we desire often conflict. I might want money and I might be able to get it by killing people, but it's wrong to kill people to take their money. Desires don't justify immoral behavior. What matters most is what is moral, not what we desire. Fulfilling desires can be perfectly rational, but we shouldn't fulfill our desires in a way that conflicts with moral demands.

If morality isn't overriding, then there is no reason to say that I shouldn't kill people when it helps fulfill my desires *as long as I could get away with it*. That result seems absurd.

4. It's rational to be moral. – To say that something is "rational" is to say that it's not "irrational" and it's sufficiently justified. We say beliefs

are rational when we have sufficient reason to believe them and we say that an action is rational when it is based on sufficiently justified beliefs. It's rational for people to disagree about whether or not intrinsic values exist, but it's not rational for people to disagree about whether "1+1=2." We know it does and it's irrational to think otherwise.

To think that morality is rational means that there are true moral beliefs and an action is rational as long as it is a result of those beliefs. For example, it's rational to believe that "killing people just because they have red hair is wrong," and it's rational to refuse to kill redheads based on that belief.

In fact, morality often conflicts with our desires, and we think it's usually rational to fulfill our desires. It's rational for me to try to make money to buy food. However, it's not rational for me to kill strangers to take their money. Morality requires me to restrain my own happiness because it can conflict with the happiness of others—and those people count too.

If morality isn't rational, then it would seem irrational to allow morality to interfere with fulfilling my desires. It seems strange to say that helping the poor, giving strangers aspirins, or refusing to hurt people to satisfy my desires is irrational. Such a result seems absurd.

5. Morality isn't up to us. – Morality isn't whatever I want it to be. Morality restricts our behavior and requires us balance our own happiness against the happiness of others. Morality isn't what a culture wants it to be. Some cultures have wrong moral customs, such as racism; and some cultures undergo moral progress, such as when we abolished slavery. Moral beliefs aren't true just because we believe they are true. Sometimes people have false moral beliefs.

If morality is up to us, then we could say that slavery isn't wrong—just like people did for thousands of years—and we would be right. And if morality is up to us, then we could say racism isn't wrong—just like people did for thousands of years—and we would be right. However,

slavery and racism are wrong. The thought that we could make slavery or racism right seems absurd.

6. Some actions are right and some are wrong. – Perhaps the most intuitive core of morality is the belief that certain specific actions are right and some are wrong. Being a whistleblower, being a freedom fighter, and being an activist are at least sometimes the right thing to be. Killing people just because they have red hair is wrong. Slavery and racism are wrong.

If some actions are never right or wrong, then our heroes (Socrates, Gandhi, and King Jr.) never did anything right; slavery was never wrong; and racism was never wrong. These results seem absurd.

I have explained why certain highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs are the sorts of beliefs we think are true. These beliefs are intuitive and might even be *part of our moral knowledge*. These beliefs could be false, but that would require a huge shocking revelation. We shouldn't reject these beliefs without a very good reason for doing so.

I didn't fully explain or justify the fact that highly plausible uncontroversial beliefs are important to philosophy here, and I might write more about it in the future. However, I have written about this issue in more detail in "[Common Sense Assumptions vs Self-Evidence](#)."

Chapter 5: 10 Myths about Morality

Although philosophers disagree about many elements of morality, they agree about quite a bit as well. Philosophers disagree about whether capital punishment or the war on drugs are right, but they agree that slavery and torture are almost always wrong (if not always wrong). Philosophers also agree quite a bit about what views about morality are false, *and for good reason*. These myths are untenable views about morality, and they are often very popular among the nonphilosophers. I think it's important that everyone learn that these views are untenable. I will discuss ten of these myths about morality:

1. Morality is a matter of opinion.
2. All opinions about morality are equal.
3. It is impossible to reason about morality.
4. It is impossible to have moral knowledge.
5. There are no justified moral beliefs.
6. The situation isn't relevant to morality.
7. Objective morality requires God.
8. We have no reason to be moral unless God exists.
9. Either morality comes from God or relativism is true.
10. Either morality is relative or absolute.

1. Morality is a matter of opinion.

Many people think that "there are no moral facts, so moral opinions are just a matter of taste." A fact is a part of the world. For example, my belief that I have a dog corresponds to the actual existence of my dog in the world. Many people think that morality is nothing like this. There is no wrongness or goodness in the world for my beliefs about wrongness and goodness to correspond to. Many people then conclude that morality is either delusional or is just based on people's personal preferences. To say that slavery is wrong does not correspond to wrongness in the world, but it is an expression of my personal dislike of slavery instead. If saying slavery is wrong is merely to express

a personal dislike to slavery, then it's just like a personal dislike of broccoli.

However, philosophers at large strongly disagree that morality is just a matter of taste.

First, most philosophers think there are moral facts. When I experience suffering, it seems that the suffering really is bad. To think suffering isn't bad is to completely misunderstand what the word even means. We say that something is wrong because it creates something bad, such as suffering.

Many philosophers argue that we can observe moral facts—such as the badness of suffering (of myself and others). I know that other people experience suffering just like I do and I know they experience suffering from intense pain. I know that similar things that give me pain (such as severe burns) also give other people pain. I know that the loss of a loved on can cause suffering in myself and others, and I can observe other people experiencing grief despite the fact that I can't actually see inside of their mind. I know that their mind is similar to mine and will have similar experiences with similar expressions of their experiences (such as body language).

Many philosophers agree that to say something is "wrong" has to do with the harm caused by the action. For example, something can be wrong if it causes more harm than the amount of good that is done. (This is often compared to alternative actions as well. To kill a criminal might have some benefit to society, but a similar benefit might be attained merely by life in prison.)

Second, some philosophers agree that morality is a human invention, but they still agree that some actions are *universally* immoral and others aren't. For example, moral actions could be those that will mostly help people and immoral actions can be those that mostly hurt people (with a consideration of alternatives), and this is *true for everyone*. Certain things really do help people and certain things really do hurt people. The words "hurt" and "help" could refer to things

people agree to, even if they don't refer to things beyond our interests (e.g. suffering is a form of harm).

Imagine that morality is just a matter of taste. In that case you could never reason with anyone and explain to them why it's wrong to torture people or have slaves. We couldn't explain why racism or sexism is wrong. Either the person likes torture and slavery, or they don't. Either they like other racial groups or they don't. And so on. This is not only false, but it is dangerous. To think that morality is just a matter of taste is to become unreasonable. If morality is a matter of taste, then we will decide that we have no reason to listen to moral arguments. We could then decide that slavery isn't wrong no matter what anyone says (if we personally want slaves). If morality is a matter of taste, then we would have no reason to improve ourselves morally because improvement would be impossible. Hitler and Stalin would not be evil as long as they believed they were doing right.

However, morality isn't a matter of taste and we have reason to listen to moral arguments.

2. All opinions about morality are equal.

Many people think that morality is a matter of opinion, which means "everyone's moral beliefs are equal." This view is false. All serious philosophers agree that some moral beliefs are better than others. The belief that *slavery is wrong* is a better belief than the belief that *killing people is always right*.

How can one moral belief be better than another? Because some moral beliefs have better justifications than others. We can explain why some moral beliefs are more likely to be true than other beliefs. The more likely a belief is to be true (given our current information), the more justified it is.

How exactly moral beliefs are justified is a matter of debate, but we seem to know certain moral beliefs are true—such as *killing people*

willy nilly is wrong and *slavery is wrong*. We can try to understand how these beliefs can be known to be true. For example, slavery and killing people willy nilly are wrong because they *treat people with disrespect* and *they cause suffering*. We know it's bad to be disrespected or to experience suffering because we have had personal experience in the matter, and we know that other people will also experience such things as bad.

Imagine that all moral beliefs are equal. In that case you would have no reason to listen to the moral arguments given by others and you would have no reason to seek to improve yourself morally. No one would really be immoral as long as they believed that they aren't immoral.

But now that we know that moral beliefs aren't equal, we have reason to listen to moral arguments and improve ourselves morally.

3. It is impossible to reason about morality.

Many people think that it is impossible to have a reason to adopt a moral belief. It is impossible to tell a person why slavery is wrong. In that case, it would be impossible to justify our moral beliefs. However, philosophers agree that reasoning about morality is possible. The only reason to think that we can't reason about morality is to blindly think that morality is a matter of taste, or all moral beliefs are equal. I have already explained why morality is not a matter of taste—because we agree about what harms and benefits people. I have also explained why moral beliefs are not equal—we know that certain moral beliefs are true and we can find out why they are true.

I wrote more about moral reason in my discussion, [Can We Reason About Morality?](#)

4. It is impossible to have moral knowledge.

Many people think it is impossible to have moral knowledge. This is either because they believe that there are no moral facts or because they think it is impossible to reason about morality. Some philosophers might agree that it's impossible to have moral knowledge in the sense that there are no moral facts for our knowledge to refer to. However, most philosophers think there are moral facts and no one should blindly accept that moral knowledge is impossible. Before committing yourself to that view, you should know why most philosophers disagree with it. For example, suffering seems to be really bad and not just something we agree is bad. Suffering is bad no matter what people believe about it.

Additionally, philosophers almost unanimously agree that we can reason about morality and I have explained why. The superficial belief that moral knowledge is impossible quickly leads people to reject moral reasoning and the intention to improve themselves morally, but almost no philosophers think that. All philosophers I know of agree that we can reason about morality and improve ourselves morally.

Finally, it is not necessary to *explicitly* reason about morality to have moral knowledge. We don't need an argument to know that slavery is wrong. Many things we know are not very easily explained. For example, it's not easy to explain why "1+1=2" is true, but *we still know it is true.*

5. There are no justified moral beliefs.

In most cases the view that there are no justified moral beliefs is the same as the view that we can't reason about morality. The belief that moral beliefs can't be justified is baseless and rejected by almost all philosophers, and it is the main motivation behind the idea that "all moral beliefs are equal." I have already explained why not all moral beliefs are equal—some are better justified than others. We can theorize about why some actions are wrong, such as the fact that it causes harm. We might be able to observe or confirm that our theory is correct if the explanation makes enough sense. For example, the

theory that nothing is wrong unless I personally dislike it is undermined by the fact that I might personally like harming others despite the fact that such sadistic acts can be wrong. On the other hand a theory that acts are wrong when they cause needless and unjustified harm is greatly confirmed by our moral experiences and knowledge—such as the belief that murder, rape, slavery, and torture are wrong.

Additionally, no actual argument must be presented to have a justified belief. I might have good reason to think murder is wrong even if I can't explain why. At one point I wasn't sure why murder was wrong, but that doesn't mean the belief was unjustified. I knew that murder was wrong, but I just wasn't sure how to explain how I knew it.

Of course, we need to be able to provide arguments to persuade anyone else that we have knowledge. Sometimes our knowledge is hidden from others and they have no reason to trust us. We need to actually provide an argument to prove to others that our beliefs are justified.

Finally, it is true that two people can have different and conflicting justified beliefs. Some beliefs are highly justified and are the most justified beliefs we can have. The belief that *torturing people willy nilly is wrong* is incredibly more justified than the belief that it's not. However, more controversial beliefs can be held despite a great deal of uncertainty. For example, some philosophers believe that capital punishment isn't wrong and others believe it is wrong; and both of these beliefs can be justified to various degrees. It can be rational to have either belief once a person has a sufficient justification to hold the belief. Some justified beliefs can be rationally held and rationally rejected, but other justified beliefs are so highly justified that people would be irrational insofar as they reject the belief.

6. The situation isn't relevant to morality.

Many people think that if anything is right or wrong, it's always right

or wrong. Lying, stealing, killing people, rape, and slavery are believed to be *always wrong* or *never wrong*. If an action always leads to suffering without an appropriate justification, then philosophers will agree that it is always wrong. However, it isn't clear that all wrong actions are always wrong in this way. In fact, the situation is always relevant to moral reasoning. If the situation is one in which people are harmed with little to no expected benefit, then it is wrong. If the situation is one in which lying or killing a person is necessary to save hundreds of lives, then the action could be justified.

Ultimately the situation is necessary to understand why any action can be classified as "wrong." Although rape might always be wrong, it is only *always* wrong (if it is) because it causes needless suffering in every situation possible.

It might be that goodness and badness, unlike right and wrong, don't depend on the situation. The existence of harms are bad, and benefits are good, and that is nothing to do with the situation. The pleasure of sadism can have some goodness, even though the sadism can motivate wrong behavior. To harm someone to get pleasure is usually wrong despite the fact that the pleasure attained is good. The harms and benefits expected from an action are part of our cost-benefit reasoning and a single harm or benefit isn't always sufficient to determine whether the action is wrong or not.

The belief that the situation is irrelevant to morality leads to simplistic and sloppy moral thinking. People decide that moral rules must be much more simple than they actually are, and people refuse to make use of moral reasoning because the subtleties of various situations are ignored even when they are necessary to determine which action is appropriate. Such poor moral reasoning can lead to immoral actions.

I have written about the relevance the situation has to morality is greater detail in my discussion, Moral [Absolutism, Relativism, and the Situation](#).

7. Objective morality requires God.

"Objective morality" can mean different things, such as "there are moral facts" or "there are universal moral truths." Almost all philosophers agree that there are universal moral truths, but some aren't sure that moral facts exist. However, almost no philosopher thinks that God is necessary for moral facts to exist. If suffering is bad, then God doesn't have a say on the matter. God can't decide that suffering is good. The fact that God commands us not to cause needless suffering isn't what makes an act wrong. If God has any commandments, then they are based on moral facts rather than the other way around. If God likes all morally right acts and dislikes all morally wrong acts, that is because they are right or wrong based on facts in the world.

The belief that God determines morality rather than moral facts in general is dangerous because many people with such a view will reject that we can reason about morality. They think that we can't find out about moral facts on our own—we need to depend on God's commandments and insight. It might be that God's insight can be helpful, but moral reasoning and justifications should not be ignored. To reject moral reasoning and justification is dangerous because they can lead to poorly formed moral beliefs. Some religious fanatics decided that slavery and intolerance were endorsed or permitted by God and they refused to use any moral reasoning to know the truth.

I discuss the view that morality doesn't require God is more detail in my discussion Morality, God, Relativism, and Nihilism and my free ebook, Does Morality Require God?

8. We have no reason to be moral unless God exists.

Almost all philosophers agree that we have a reason to be moral even if God does not exist. This is easy to explain for people who believe in moral facts—we have a reason to do things with good rather than bad consequences. There is real goodness and badness, and it is rational to

try to cause good consequences and irrational to try to cause bad consequences. To have a *reason* to do something doesn't necessarily mean that one has a motivation to do it. Self-sacrifice can be rational when it is done to significantly benefit many people (perhaps by saving hundreds of lives).

People who don't believe in moral facts have a difficult task—to prove that we should be motivated to help others. To prove that it's in one's self-interest to be moral. This task isn't necessarily impossible and it is a task that many philosophers have attempted to accomplish (such as Thomas Hobbes).

9. Either morality comes from God or relativism is true.

Relativism refers to the belief that morality is a human invention or is a matter of taste. The view that morality is a matter of taste has already been rejected, but some philosophers agree that morality is a human invention. However, almost no philosophers thinks that God has anything to do with the debate. I have already argued above that there can be moral facts, even if God doesn't exist. If God exists, then he merely knows moral facts that would exist anyway.

This belief was explained in greater detail in my discussion, [Morality, God, Relativism, and Nihilism](#).

10. Either morality is relative or absolute.

To say that morality is absolute means that the situation is irrelevant to morality. To think that morality is either a human invention (or a matter of taste) or absolute is completely baseless. I already explained how both of these claims can be rejected. Morality can be based on facts (such as the fact that suffering is bad) rather than a human invention, and moral facts have little to nothing to do with God. If God exists, then he might know moral facts rather than determine them.

This belief was explained in greater detail in my discussion, [Absolutism, Relativism, and the Situation](#).

Many of these myths about morality have one thing in common—they stop philosophical thinking. They make sure that there is no reason to think anyone could have anything to teach us about morality. If anything is right or wrong, then I think we have reason to think that our moral beliefs can be false and we should try to learn more about it *because so much is at stake*. Moral philosophy has something to offer the world, but it's been designated a marginalized position in our society for ivory tower elites.

Some of these myths about morality might actually be products of 100 to 200-year-old philosophy that have been passed down to the masses and corrupted by a lack of actual philosophical oversight. The beliefs that people have concerning morality can be dangerous because they prevent people from engaging in moral reasoning, listening to moral arguments, considering moral philosophy, and improving themselves.

Chapter 6: Morality, God, Relativism, & Nihilism

Although most people have no idea what philosophers have to say about morality that doesn't deter them from discussing philosophical ramifications of morality. In particular many people want to argue the following:

1. Objective morality requires God.
2. Morality is relative.
3. Nothing really matters.

Most philosophers disagree with any of the above claims, but for some reason many other people seem to easily agree with them.[4] I will briefly describe how I view morality and why I personally disagree with the above claims.

How I view morality

Morality is about making good choices that promotes certain goods rather than impedes them. Most people accept that certain goods, such as human life and happiness, are the sorts of goods that should be promoted and shouldn't be impeded.

Ethics is the philosophy of morality. Through ethics we can reason about which goods are worthy of morality and the best way to accomplish such goals. How to accomplish our goals can be a scientific endeavor (i.e. drinking water is necessary to healthy), but deciding which goals are worthy is more difficult.

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4   Some contemporary philosophers do endorse moral relativism, but their view is still much different than the relativism endorsed by most non-philosophers. For example, a philosopher might think that we can reason about moral goals, and moral goals are maximally worthy when they are based on maximal non-moral knowledge. People who know everything about the world can certainly make the most informed moral judgments, but philosophical relativists insist that moral judgments could be different for each person.

An example of a *moral fact* is that "torturing people willy nilly" is wrong because we know that pain is bad from our personal experiences of pain.

Additionally, I endorse [intrinsic values](). What can make a goal *morally worthy* is somewhat controversial in the academic world, but I believe that morally worthy goals promote intrinsic values. I not only know that pain is bad, but I know that pain *really matters*. I shouldn't cause others pain even if it would benefit me to do so because everyone's pain has negative value.

For more information about how I view morality and intrinsic values, you might want to take a look at my ebooks, [Two New Kinds of Stoicism]() and [Is There A Meaning of Life?]()

Objective morality requires God.

I'm not exactly sure what most people think "objective morality" or "objective value" refers to, but the main idea that most people seem to have in mind is that we have moral rules that apply to everyone. Morality in that sense is universal.

To say that "objective morality requires God" is pretty much synonymous with saying that "universal moral rules would be meaningless unless God exists." God is taken to be a supernatural foundation for morality. Either God is an *ideal* person that manifests perfect virtues or God is a law maker who makes the moral laws for us to follow.

Why do I disagree that "God is necessary for morality?"

One, as far as I can tell, the fact that pain is bad has nothing to do with God's virtues or commands. If I found out that God doesn't exist, I would certainly still think that torturing people willy nilly is wrong because I would *still* accept that pain is bad.

Two, as far as I can tell, I don't know anything about morality from God's virtues. I have never seen God and I don't know anything about his virtues. It seems to me that I can't learn about morality by observing God. Even if I did observe God and somehow decided that *God has a virtue of causing pain*, I would still think that pain is bad. God's so-called nature and perfection couldn't convince me that pain isn't bad.

Three, as far as I can tell, I don't know morality through God's commandments. If God didn't command us not to cause pain, I would still think torturing people willy nilly is wrong. If God commanded me to torture people willy nilly, I would still think it would be wrong to do so.

For more information about why I don't think objective morality requires God, you might want to take a look at my ebook, [Does Morality Require God?](#)

Morality is relative.

Many people accept that God is necessary for "objective morality" but they reject that God exists. The result for some is that they think morality is *relative* or *subjective* rather than *objective*. It might be that pain is bad for me, but it's good for someone else. This tends to mean two things: (1) We can't reason about morality because it's just a matter of taste. (2) Morality is merely indoctrinated behavior regulation.

When we say that pain is bad for me but not bad for someone else, it could merely mean that I dislike pain and someone else likes it. Reason is then irrelevant to morality. We can't say that I'm right and you're wrong because there is no objective truth to morality. There are no moral facts that we can try to learn about.

Why do I disagree that "morality is relative?"

One, we know that we can reason about morality, but relativists deny that we can reason about morality. For example, I can reason that your pain is bad for the same reason that my pain is bad.[5] I can also reason that to say that "my pain is bad, but no one else's pain is bad" is *absurd*.

It is not controversial that moral reasoning is possible as is illustrated by the fact that (1) we accept that moral progress is possible and (2) we accept that our moral beliefs can be false. We can have moral progress, such as outlawing slavery. We can find out that our moral beliefs are false, such as the belief that slavery should be legal when we now know that slavery should be illegal.

Two, there are non-controversial universal moral facts, but moral relativists must deny that there are such facts, such as the fact that torturing people willy nilly is wrong.

Nothing really matters.

Many non-philosophers are content to be moral relativists, but relativism requires that we accept that *nothing really matters* (which is often called "nihilism").[6] In other words they reject intrinsic values. I think this is one of the main reasons that theists are not satisfied with relativism. If nothing really matters, then what's the point in being moral? There isn't any.

Much of the debate involving morality and God is the idea that

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5   Atheism and ignorance are not the only motivations for moral relativism. Some people also endorse relativism because they think such a position is "tolerant" and will help them get along with others. Instead of saying, "I'm right and you're wrong," the relativist can say, "Everyone's entitled to their own opinion." I am not impressed with this line of reasoning because it gives up too easily and decides not to argue about morality just because it can help make friends and so forth. The position is ultimately against philosophy itself because it tells us not to think too much about morality and just take things at face value.

6   The view that "nothing really matters" is accepted by some contemporary philosophers, but such philosophers are not relativists as relativism is described above, and such philosophers almost unanimously believes that we can reason about morality.

atheists can't be moral. Certainly atheists can *act* morally just like anyone else, but theists then insist that atheists can't be moral in the sense that morality itself is *delusional* for the atheist. The atheist couldn't be *rationally* moral. Being moral would not longer be rational and could even be irrational.

I agree that it is rational to be moral because *something* really matters, but I don't think that has anything to do with God. I think pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad because I have first hand experience with these things, not because of God's virtuous ideal nature or commandments. If God commanded us to hurt each other, then I would think God was wrong to do so. I would think that pleasure has intrinsic value and pain has intrinsic disvalue no matter what God is like.

Why do I disagree with the proposition that "nothing really matters?"

One, I have already briefly described why I think pleasure and pain involve intrinsic values. I don't think that pleasure is merely desired, but I think that pleasure is desired because we know it's good. I also discuss many arguments in favor of intrinsic values [here](.).

Two, some of our commitments concerning morality seem to require us to accept that intrinsic values exist. Consider the following:

(1) We are committed to the fact that one should choose to *care* about people if given the choice not to care. If morality isn't objective, then we could imagine that we could find out that our feelings *delude* us into caring for people. We might be able to learn to stop having empathy for others and stop allowing our moral feelings to control us. We could then learn to live without morality. There would be nothing irrational with doing such a thing because morality would be delusional to begin with.

(2) The word "ought" itself seems to indicate that morality is objective because it indicates that one action is right or wrong no matter what I personal believe or desire. If I ought to do something, then it is good

to do it. However, if morality is just a group of arbitrary rules that people tend to care about, then the word "ought" would merely indicate that some behavior follows those rules better than others. But so what? In that case I ought to help others only in the sense that I have a tendency to like people to help others. That wouldn't be any more *important* than following rules of etiquette.

Conclusion

All three of these views seem to give God's connection to morality too much credit, and many people reject objective morality almost entirely because they reject God's existence. However, that's not to say that any of this makes any sense. This isn't an issue for many contemporary philosophers at all. Almost no philosophers agree that morality requires God or that morality is relative. There are some philosophers who think that *nothing really matters* but philosophers will usually insist that we can reason about morality. Morality might be objective even if *nothing really matters.*

My understanding of morality involves reasoning and worthy goals, and these elements seem easy enough to understand with common sense alone. God doesn't seem to help the situation, and relativism fails to consider that we reason about morality. People who reject intrinsic values can often reason about morality, but they must reject certain uncontroversial facts concerning the nature of morality, such as morality's importance.

Chapter 7: Moral Absolutism, Relativism, & The Situation

I have been surprised to find out how many people are moral absolutists. Moral absolutists believe that the situation can't be relevant to morality. Many people argue that either moral absolutism is true or relativism is true, but I reject both of these positions. Moral reasoning is possible because morality has a connection to reality (unlike moral relativism) *and* the situation is relevant to moral reasoning (unlike moral absolutism).

Moral absolutism is the idea that moral rules are relevant *no matter what* and the situation is irrelevant to morality. I know of no philosopher who has ever accepted this position, but Immanuel Kant might seem to come close when he argues that you should be honest even when an enraged killer asks you where your dad is.[7] (See Kant's "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy.")

Relativism is the view that we can't reason about morality and that morality is something like a cultural demand, such as etiquette. What is true and false in morality isn't really important. It's just something we accept for the most part for some reason. I argue that relativism is an untenable position in "Morality, God, Relativism, and Nihilism."

The extreme black and white over-simplified way some people view morality is that it is either absolute (the situation is irrelevant) or relative. Some people argue that morality must be made up because it certainly isn't absolute, and others argue that morality must be absolute because it certainly isn't relative. The idea behind such arguments seems to be that the situation can only apply to morality if morality isn't part of the world. If morality is part of the world, then

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7   That isn't to say that Kant really was a moral absolutist. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy, Kant's categorical imperative requires us to "First, formulate a maxim that enshrines your reason for acting as you propose. Second, recast that maxim as a universal law of nature governing all rational agents, and so as holding that all must, by natural law, act as you yourself propose to act in these circumstances" (Robert Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," section 5). In other words what you are required to do can be different in different circumstances.

absolutism is true; and if morality isn't part of the world, then relativism is true.

However, [intrinsic value beliefs](#) (and almost every moral theory) seems to demand that (1) morality is part of the world, (2) we can reason about morality, and (3) the situation can be relevant to morality.

1. Morality is part of the world.

The idea that pain is intrinsically bad is not just my belief that pain is bad, and it's not just that I dislike pain. A person who never feels pain would probably not know how bad it is. A person can be wrong about how important pain is. Pain is bad no matter what I believe or desire, and it is therefore a good idea to help myself and others avoid pain.

Additionally, morality might not only depend on the contents of minds (such as pain), but people might also have value just for existing. We think it is better to exist than not exist.

2. We can reason about morality.

If we can find out that pain is intrinsically bad, that doesn't mean that it is absolutely wrong to cause pain no matter what. Doing homework can be painful, but still the right thing to do. We have to consider all the benefits and harms our actions would entail. Killing someone could be wrong insofar as human life has value and killing people destroys that life and value, but it might be possible that some actions are morally permissible even if they can lead to death. We drive cars knowing perfectly well that some people will get killed by car accidents, but we think that the benefits outweigh the costs.

We not only *reason* about the costs and benefits of our actions, but also about what benefits are truly worthy of morality. (See "[Can We Reason About Morality?](#)" for more information.

3. The situation can be relevant to morality.

Although I personally believe that the situation is always relevant to morality, I am open to the possibility that *some* moral rules are absolute. I merely want to strongly reject that the situation is never relevant to morality. Consider how the situation is relevant to morality in the following uncontroversial cases:

1. It can sometimes be necessary to harm someone in self-defense.
2. Stealing food might be necessary when an oppressed group of people have no other way to get it.
3. Killing people might be necessary to defend your home country from an invasion.

The situation is necessary to determine right and wrong in the above cases. Hurting people isn't wrong no matter what considering that it can be necessary to hurt people in self-defense. If your choice is to either die or end up hurting the person trying to kill you, it would be preferable to hurt them.

Not only do uncontroversial moral truths reveal that the situation can be relevant to determining right and wrong, but there are two additional arguments worth considering:

1. All moral rules seem to require a context.
2. Absolute moral rules can't regulate behavior appropriately.
3. Absolute moral rules can contradict each other.

All moral rules seem to require a context.

Some moral philosophers might agree that the situation is only relevant to some but not all moral rules. However, it isn't clear to be that this is the case. Consider that rape, murder, and torturing children seem to be *always wrong no matter what.* However, these forbidden actions *imply situations* and we merely reject that anything could justify an action in a certain situation.

"Rape" refers to nonconsensual sex. When in a situation where the other doesn't consent to sex, it is immoral to have sex.

"Murder" refers to unjustified killing. We don't say that soldiers "murder" the enemy during combat. There might be justified (or at least somewhat reasonable) cases when killing people seems necessary.

"Torturing children" refers to a situation when you are torturing a child instead of someone else. It also refers to a situation when certain bodily movements cause someone harm. It might be that those bodily movements wouldn't cause harm in a different context.

These three morally forbidden acts could easily be forbidden from a reasonable moral theory. All three of the actions would clearly cause more harm than benefit. It is the situation of causing harm that is relevant to such actions.

One could even argue that there is a moral rule "to always do what is right no matter what," but this rule could also imply various situations. What is right to do one moment in your life will often be different from the next. We would have to consider the situation we are in. Do we need food? Is it time to go to work? And so on.

If the situation doesn't make any difference, then we wouldn't agree that it isn't wrong to use explosives on the moon, but it is wrong to use explosives inside of someone's house?

Finally, I can't imagine what it would be like for morality to totally lack a context. If the situation doesn't make any difference to morality, then your bodily movements will have to be found right or wrong no matter what. Punching a wall would be just as wrong as punching a person. The context of having no person near your fist when you punch would be irrelevant.

Absolute moral rules can't regulate behavior appropriately.

If it is possible for absolute morality to tell us *not to do what is wrong*, then I suppose we could follow such commands by doing nothing. Doing what is wrong requires you to do something, so doing nothing should be safe. However, it can't tell us to do what is right. Advisable behavior, such as giving to charity, being productive to society, and eating food can only be understood given a situation. If giving to charity is right *no matter what*, then we should give to charity every second of our life forever and we could never do anything else. The same is true about being productive and eating.

Immanuel Kant suggests that preserving one's life is not only advisable but a moral obligation, but we should note that preserving one's life is impossible unless we know what situation we are in. We need to know if we need to run out of the way of a train, get food to avoid starvation, and so on.

Absolute moral rules can contradict each other.

Imagine we accept the following two absolute moral rules:

1. Preserve your life.
2. Hurting others is wrong.
3. Stealing is wrong.

Given the first moral rule it might be necessary to hurt people in self-defense or steal a loaf of bread to avoid starvation given certain circumstances. That means that the first rule can contradict the other two. If we realize that these moral rules require us to consider the situation, then the contradiction dissipates because we can realize that moral rules of this kind are over-simplifications and rare situations might require us to break the rules. Such a position that these moral rules are over-simplifications seems to be the right way to go because we accept uncontroversial moral truths, such as "Stealing to stay alive can be the right thing to do."

The rejection of over-simplified moral rules is not completely arbitrary and does not force us to become relativists. We realize that it is reality itself that determines what is right and wrong, not some simple moral rule. We have to assess the benefits and harms of an action rather than cling to simple rules.

Conclusion

The idea that all moral rules are absolute (and the situation is never relevant to morality) is not only false, but it doesn't seem to make any sense. If moral rules were absolute, then I would still have to wonder if such rules had anything to do with reality. I'm not as interested in moral rules as I am with the parts of reality that justify them. The facts that pain is bad, pleasure is good, and human life is good all involve valuable parts of reality that can explain why one situation is better than another and give us a way to reason about morality.

I suspect that many people are moral absolutists because of religious views. Morality does not require us to merely have faith in God's commands that must be treated as absolutes. We can reason about morality using theories and we can try to figure out what goals are the most worthy. We shouldn't be moral absolutists whether or not God is real. There moral philosophers who believe in God, but there pretty much no philosophers that believe in moral absolutism.

Finally, I must admit that I am talking about a form of extremist moral absolutism. There are probably less extreme views that also are called "moral absolutism."

Chapter 8: Does Evolution Adequately Explain Morality?

Many people are satisfied with the idea that morality comes from evolution. This is somehow supposed to satisfy the masses, but it seems to miss the point of morality. What does it mean to for morality to come from evolution? It means that somehow moral behavior was a reproductive advantage and that's why we have moral behavior now. (Additionally, immoral behavior was a reproductive disadvantage.) So, we care for others and help other people because that's natural behavior we inherited from our genes.

The appeal to evolution is often used in debates about God's existence. Some theists argue that morality requires God, and some atheists will reply that moral behavior would indeed exist without God thanks to evolution.[8] I agree that the evolution line of argument is unconvincing for the following reasons:

1. It doesn't tell me that intrinsic values exist.
2. It commits the naturalistic fallacy.
3. It doesn't tell me that being moral is rational.

I admit that evolution can explain why behavior that *looks moral* exists, but evolution doesn't itself explain why behavior that looks moral is *really moral*. We can agree that cooperation and caring for others evolved if it increased our reproductive advantage, but that doesn't mean that cooperation and caring is always morally right or rational. Additionally, we might have evolved the ability to do moral philosophy and to *discover* that moral behavior is rational. That in and of itself doesn't prove that moral behavior I really rational. We need a separate argument from evolution to know that it is truly rational to do the right thing and that morality itself really matters.

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8   This has been observed by "nonstampcollector" who seemed to take the evolutionary argument to be so obviously satisfying that it should never be allowed to be mentioned again. This position was presented in his video, "http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSLkQnCurgs."

It doesn't tell me that intrinsic values exist.

Many people want to know if anything really matters. If something really matters, then it has [intrinsic value](#). For example, it seems to make sense to want to be happy because we think it's intrinsically good to be happy. If happiness has intrinsic value, then we would have a reason to want to help other people be happy—it would really be a good thing to do.

However, if we evolved moral behavior, then we still don't know if happiness really matters or not. If we evolved morality, then we would naturally care about people; but we might not know the best way to benefit people. If happiness has intrinsic value, then one legitimate way to benefit people is to help them attain happiness. If happiness doesn't have intrinsic value, then it might not be entirely clear how we could best benefit others.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

The [naturalistic fallacy](#) is a mistake in reasoning that occurs when we assume that something ought to be the case just because it is the case. The main argument that evolution explains morality is just that it describes why moral behavior exists. In other words:

1. We care for others because of our genetics.
2. Therefore, we *ought* to care for others.

This argument simply doesn't work. Why? For one thing it also works for immoral behavior:

1. We commit horrible crimes because of our genetics.
2. Therefore, we ought to commit horrible crimes.

In conclusion, the fact that we can describe moral behavior as being caring for others and that caring for others happens thanks to evolution does not make caring for others rational (something you

ought to do).

It doesn't tell me that being moral is rational.

I would like to explore the issue of moral rationality further. Sure, it might be that evolution will explain why we care for people from their genetics, but *evolution will also explain why we are so immoral*. We often choose to harm other people when we expect to be benefited by doing so. What's so much better about being moral than immoral? If we evolved to care for others, then we might still wonder—Is it rational to care for others? Why shouldn't I choose to be immoral when doing so can benefit me? The simple answer is—if we evolved moral and immoral behavior, then morality wouldn't be any more rational than immorality *unless intrinsic values exist.*

Some people want to argue that caring for others is rational insofar as it encourages cooperative behavior that would be justified from rational self interest. The problem here is that what is justified selfishly is not necessarily what is moral. It can be within our self interest to be cooperative with some people and to harm others. Many rich people enjoy exploiting the poor precisely because it is in their self interest— in the very least exploitation is *sometimes* in the interest of the rich.

Without intrinsic values, immoral behavior is *irrational* usually only when we fear that we could be punished. If fear of punishment is the cornerstone of morality, then Thomas Hobbes's <u>Leviathan</u> is correct that we need to submit ourselves to people who have a right to violence (such as the police) and adopting a totalitarian state could be the best way to prevent immoral behavior.

If intrinsic values exist, then we have a reason to want to be moral and care for others even when we don't want to. If intrinsic values don't exist, then evolution will not give anyone a reason to want to be moral or care for others except when doing so would be in one's self-interest. Of course, doing what is in one's self-interest is what we would expect people to do *when morality has no significance*. In a world without

morality, people would still be *rationally* caring and cooperative to the extent that they think it will be mutually beneficial to do so.

Conclusion

Evolution alone is not a good explanation for morality because we want to know why it is *rational* to be moral, but evolution doesn't answer that question. Evolution alone (without intrinsic values) would require us to admit that *morality has no significance* and we are rationally cooperative and caring only when we are personally benefited for doing so.

Finally, nothing I said about intrinsic value has anything to do with God. The atheistic defense of morality involving evolution is inappropriate, but there could be a better response. I have my own response in my free ebook, [Does Morality Require God?](#) I think the appropriate response to the assertion that morality requires God is that intrinsic values, if they exist, probably have nothing to do with God.

Chapter 9: How to Become Moral

Even when we know right from wrong we still might decide to do wrong. Becoming moral is a challenging task and requires us to find motivation to be moral. I suggest that the following are aids in our quest to find moral motivation:

1. Rationality
2. Intellectual virtues
3. Moral theories
4. Moral knowledge
5. Appropriate thoughts
6. Close relationships
7. Experience
8. Spiritual exercises

These eight aids can go a long way in motivating moral behavior and lacking these aids can be dangerous. A culture that does not foster these aids is a culture that neglects morality and should expect immoral behavior. (Unfortunately all cultures seem to neglect these aids to various degrees.)

Rationality

A good ability to reason helps us determine what beliefs are most justified or "rational." A belief must be sufficiently rational and justified or we shouldn't have it. The ability to reason requires us to understand logic either consciously or unconsciously. The ability to apply logic to our reasoning is aided by an explicit understanding of logic and experience with reasoning. Presenting arguments and engaging in debates can help us practice our ability to reason.

Additional reading – I discuss reasoning, formal logic, and errors in reasoning in my free ebook, How to Become a Philosopher. A free detailed introduction to formal logic is presented at the Hofstra

[University website by Stefan Waner and Steven R. Costenoble](). A free discussion of fallacies (errors in reasoning) is discussed at the [Fallacy Files]().

Intellectual virtues

To have intellectual virtues is to be willing and able to be reasonable. A person with intellectual virtues will reject irrational beliefs and refuse to reject rationally required beliefs. It is irrational to believe that "1+1=3" and it's rationally required to believe that "1+1=2." Intellectual virtues include appropriate open mindedness and appropriate skepticism. An extreme lack of intellectual virtues can lead to fanaticism.

Additional reading – I discuss intellectual virtues in detail in [Intellectual Virtues, Dogmatism, Fanatacism, and Terrorism]().

Moral theories

The best moral theories are highly developed, comprehensive, and coherent accounts of morality that can help us determine right from wrong. Good moral theories are the result of years worth of moral debates and moral reasoning. Philosophers have now been discussing morality and moral theories for thousands of years, so a great deal of progress has been made.

Additionally, learning moral philosophy in general—thousands of years of moral debate between philosophers—can provide us with thousands of years of knowledge. It's a lot easier to learn about morality from thousands of years of those who have spent years thinking about it than to try to develop our own moral beliefs from the ground up.

Additional reading – I discuss moral theories in more detail in [Moral Theories]().

Moral knowledge

Ideally moral theories, moral reasoning, and intellectual virtues can lead to moral knowledge. If this ideal is not reached, then we still attain *better* moral beliefs. Once we know right from wrong we can potentially be motivated to do the right thing. Much of the time moral knowledge seems sufficient to motivate us to do the right thing because we already want to do the right thing. Virtuous people are usually motivated to do the right thing, so we are all motivated to do the right thing insofar as we are virtuous.

Appropriate thoughts

Moral knowledge can lead to appropriate thoughts. When my wallet is stolen I could think, "This is terrible! I'll kill whoever did this!" or I might think, "What can I do to get my wallet back?" The second option is more appropriate than the first. Revenge is not a moral option to losing your wallet. The Stoics suggest that appropriate thoughts are guided by moral knowledge, and appropriate emotions and actions tend to be a result of appropriate thoughts; but inappropriate thoughts can lead to inappropriate emotions and actions.[9] We can imagine someone losing their wallet as becoming enraged and seeking revenge based on the above inappropriate thoughts.

Moral knowledge does not always lead to appropriate thoughts. Our impulsive thoughts, emotions, and behavior can contradict moral knowledge. The knowledge that the money in a wallet isn't as important as human life contradicts the implied values of a person who wants to kill someone for stealing a wallet, but such an automatic response is probably pretty common.

The next step is to correct our inappropriate thoughts. Our

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9   The Buddhist's eightfold path also suggests that inappropriate thoughts can lead to inappropriate emotions and actions which ultimately cause suffering. ("Noble Eightfold Path." Wikipedia.org. 30 August 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path>.)

inappropriate thoughts can often be quenched by "cooling off" and controlling our thoughts. This is why anger management classes teach people to count to 10 when becoming enraged.

When inappropriate thoughts become obsessive it can be necessary to "talk ourselves out of it." This is when moral knowledge can become quite useful. We can present arguments and evidence that contradict our obsessive thoughts to debunk them and correct our thoughts. If we seriously start considering killing the person who stole our wallet, we can remind ourselves that the value of money is insignificant compared to the value of human life.

Close relationships

We can abstractly realize the values of human life, happiness, and suffering; but this abstraction can have little power over our motivations. To fully appreciate human life, happiness, and suffering we can understand these things from ourselves. We need to realize the value of our own life, happiness, and suffering.

The next step is to realize that other people matter too. Other people's life, happiness, and suffering has value just like our own. Other people are just as real as we are, and we aren't the center of the universe. This is pretty natural once we establish close relationships with others. Most people learn to love and care for their parents, siblings, and friends. It doesn't take long to realize that their lives, happiness, and suffering also have value.

Even then many people don't seem to connect the dots—everyone's life, happiness, and suffering have analogous value. Our family and friends aren't the only people in the world who count. Everyone counts. I suggest that we can connect the abstract realization of values to the values involved with real people after we have formed close relationships and spent some time thinking about morality.

Finally, there are cultural influences on our connections to others. Our

close relationships can be weakened when we stop spending time with friends and family. Working too many hours, spending too much time watching television, and competing for resources are three ways that we can lose our close connection to others; and other people might no longer feel as real to us. We will see cars and bodies, but we might no longer feel the importance of another person's life, happiness, and suffering. At that point we either need a powerful abstract way to care for others without a strong emotional motivation or we need to regain our emotional motivation (perhaps by spending more time with family and friends).

Experience

The actual result our actions will have in various situations is not something a moral theory or abstract reasoning will be able to give us. We need to learn to be sensitive to particularities found in each situation to know what actions will have the best results. For example, driving on the right side of the road is appropriate in the USA, but not in the UK due to the laws and behavior found in each of these societies.

Spiritual exercises

Spiritual exercises are practices used to become more virtuous that could be described as "moral therapy." Studying rationality and learning about moral theories are two common spiritual exercises that are not merely "theoretical" as some might argue. However, many spiritual exercises are less theoretical and take abstract knowledge for granted. For example:

1. Reflect upon your past and make it clear to yourself how things could be improved. Decide if there are any mistakes you have made that should not be repeated in the future.
2. Reflect upon the future and decide how you should respond to various situations. If you have made a mistake that you don't

want to repeat, then this intention can help prepare us against making the same mistakes again. Additionally, many people find that they are caught off guard by temptations offered in life and decide to give into those temptations when the time comes. If we prepare ourselves ahead of time it will be much easier for us to face those temptations. For example, some women have been raped in public and no one came to her rescue. We have to be prepared for this sort of situation to respond appropriately.

3. Talk to others about how you can improve your behavior. This can often be an insulting and emotional experience that makes it very difficult to achieve revelations, but you can reflect upon the conversation again once you become calm.

4. If you have inappropriate thoughts and emotions, you can clear your mind to quench them and prevent them from leading to inappropriate actions.

5. If you have inappropriate obsessive thoughts and emotions, you can present to yourself arguments and evidence against them. You can think of alternative thoughts that would be more appropriate.

Conclusion

Philosophy can help us become more virtuous by helping us have better moral beliefs and helping motivate us to act upon those moral beliefs. An understanding of rationality along with practicing argumentation can help us form better moral beliefs. Our moral beliefs are best applied to our life with life experience that allows us to better predict the outcome of our actions. Finally, forming close relationships and practicing spiritual exercises can then help us form moral motivations.

II. Moral Reasoning

Chapter 10: Can We Reason About Morality?

Not all moral beliefs are equal. Although some people might think it's impossible to argue about morality or have reasonable moral beliefs, philosophers almost always think we can. We should prefer moral beliefs that are reasonable to those that are unreasonable and those that are probably true rather than probably false. I will explain how we can come up with moral arguments in order to have the most reasonable moral beliefs possible. In particular, I will discuss the following elements of moral reason:

1. Uncontroversial moral truths
2. Analogies
3. Theoretical virtues
4. Thought experiments

Uncontroversial moral truths

There are many highly plausible moral truths that people tend to agree with, such as the following:

1. Suffering is bad.
2. Happiness is good.
3. If it is wrong for someone to do something in a situation, then it is wrong for anyone to do it in an identical situation.
4. It is always or almost always wrong to torture children.
5. It is often wrong to steal from people.

Such truths are sometimes called "moral truisms." These truths are often taken for granted during moral reasoning. Such reasoning can be explicitly and clearly stated in the form of moral arguments, such as the following:

1. It is always or almost always wrong to torture children.
2. Whipping the neighbor's child would be a case of torturing a child.
3. I have no reason to think that whipping the neighbor's child would be the right thing to do.
4. Therefore, whipping the neighbor's child is probably wrong.

The above argument uses a moral truth (it is always or almost always wrong to torture children) and combines that with two other uncontroversial facts to lead us to a moral conclusion (whipping the neighbor's child is wrong).

Moral reasoning doesn't require that we prove absolutely everything. It would be absurd to think that everyone has to know why torturing children is always or almost always wrong. It's just obvious. We can use uncontroversial truths to lead us to moral conclusions. (Compare this to mathematical knowledge. I know that 2+2=4 even though I don't know why it's true.)

However, it might be possible to learn about "why torturing children is always or almost always wrong" through other uncontroversial truths. For example:

1. We know that suffering is *bad* because we have experienced it.
2. All things equal, we know it is *wrong* to cause bad things to happen.
3. Therefore, all things equal, it's wrong to cause suffering.
4. Torture causes suffering.
5. Therefore, all things equal, torture is wrong.

The first two premises are ones I believe to be uncontroversial moral truths. If they are false, then it will be up to someone else to prove it. In the meantime it seems quite rational to agree with the above argument.

I don't want to suggest that there is never any reason to question uncontroversial truths, but being uncontroversial tends to be sufficient for justification. One way to justify an uncontroversial truth is by defending it from objections. If we have no reason to doubt an uncontroversial truth, then it makes good sense to believe it.

Analogies

Analogies help us draw general truths from less general cases. Analogies let us compare two things to find relevant similarities between the two. For example, kicking and punching people tend to be analogous actions insofar as they are used to hurt people. They are both often wrong for the same reason. Whenever it's wrong to hurt people, it will be wrong to kick or punch them in order to hurt them.

We can use analogies to justify new general moral truths by using other uncontroversial moral truths. We know that kicking people is usually wrong and we can figure out that punching people is usually wrong for the same reason. We can then use this comparison to discover a new general moral truth—hurting people is usually wrong. We can then use this general rule to realize that torture and other forms of violence are also usually wrong.

Our moral judgments for any specific person is analogous to our moral judgments for everyone else. We can consider that kicking people is generally wrong for *others* because it's bad when *I* get hurt. It's not then a big step to realize that *other* people are relevantly similar to *me*. It's bad when I get hurt, and it's bad when other people get hurt for the same reason. The disvalue of suffering is analogously similar for each person. But it's also usually wrong for me to cause others harm for the same reason it's usually wrong for others to hurt me—because harming others is usually wrong.

Additionally, there can be exceptions to general moral rules, which apply analogously for each person. It is morally acceptable for me to harm others when necessary for self-preservation, and it is acceptable

for others to harm me when necessary for self-preservation as well. Self-preservation seems to override the need to refrain from harming others in either case. We could speculate that the value of one person's life is greater than the value of another to avoid harm.

Thought experiments

Thought experiments are stories or scenarios that could lead to insight about the universe. Moral thought experiments are meant to give us insight into morality. For example, imagine that a woman puts a loaded gun up to your head and asks you to give your wallet to her. It seems like the best thing to do in this situation is to give your wallet. It would be absurd to criticize someone for giving up their wallet in this scenario.

Another thought experiment was suggested by John Stewart Mill in [Utilitarianism](). He argued that it's better to be person dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. He thought we would realize that being a person is more enjoyable than being a pig. Being a person gives us intellectual pleasures that are qualitatively better than animalistic pleasures that pigs enjoy. A little bit of intellectual pleasure seems to be superior to a great amount of animalitic pleasures (eating, sleeping, and having sex).[10]

One thought experiment done more recently was by Peter Singer in his essay [The Drowning Pond and the Expanding Circle](). He produces a thought experiment and then uses it to produce an analogy. He asks us to imagine that we can save a drowning child from a small pool of water at little cost to ourselves. Would we have an obligation to save the child or would it be morally acceptable to walk on by? The answer seems to be clear—we have an obligation to save the child. It would be wrong not to. Why? He suggests that *it's wrong to refuse to help people when doing so is at little cost to oneself.* Singer then argues that

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this is an analogous situation to giving charity. We can save lives through charity at very little cost to ourselves. (The cost to ourselves would be to live with less luxery.) Therefore, we have an obligation to give to charity.

What exactly are thought experiments doing? We often say that they give us "intuitive support" for a belief. Intuitive support tends to be difficult to explicitly state in the form of arguments. Some intuitive support is considered to be from self-evidence, but some intuitive support could also be based on personal experience and observation. For example, we can compare intellectual pleasures to the pleasures enjoyed by pigs because we have actually experienced them. We can then compare how valuable each experience was. I wrote more about intuition in my discussion, "[Arguments for Intuition](#)."

Moral reasoning is much like other forms of reasoning. We can make use of uncontroversial truths, analogies, and compare theoretical virtues. We even observe some values, such as the value of pleasure and pain.

Moral reasoning is not only compatible with moral theorizing, but it is necessary to reason about morality to theorize in the first place. The moral reasoning discussed above could be used to develop a moral theory. We also need to know something about morality before we can decide if a moral theory is plausible.

Some people have suggested that moral theories have failed us, so morality is probably a human invention. I don't agree that our moral theories have failed us, but that's irrelevant. Even if our theories have failed us, that wouldn't give us a good reason to be skeptical about morality or moral reasoning. Our moral knowledge never depended on moral theories. We know a lot about morality prior to having moral theories.

Theoretical virtues

I have discussed six [theoretical virtues](#) in the past, which help us determine when a hypothesis or belief is justified. (The virtues are: Self-evidence, logical consistency, observation, predictability, comprehensiveness, and simplicity.) The better a belief is supported by the six virtues, the more plausible the belief is.

First, some moral statements might be **self-evident**. Merely understanding the statement could be sufficient to justify the belief in it. For example, consider that "torturing children is always or almost always wrong." Knowing that torture causes intense suffering; that intense suffering is bad; that there is usually no good reason to cause intense suffering to a child; and that causing harm with no good reason is wrong seems sufficient to realize that "torturing children is always or almost always wrong" is true. We could conclude that it's self-evident that torturing children is wrong or almost always wrong based on the fact that understanding such a statement seems sufficient to knowing that it's wrong or almost always wrong.

Second, we don't want our moral beliefs to contradict one another (we want them to be **logically consistent**). If we have a choice of rejecting an uncontroversial moral truth that we are certain is true (e.g. torture is usually wrong) and a controversial belief (e.g. whipping children is usually good), then we have reason to reject the controversial belief.

We might have a serious problem when two highly plausible beliefs contradict one another, such as the belief that it's never right to hurt people and self-preservation is always right. In that case it might be necessary to hurt someone for self-preservation. The solution here is to realize that these moral rules seem to have exceptions. However, it might at times be inadvisable to be be logically consistent. We shouldn't reject an uncontroversial moral truth "just because" it might contradict another moral truth. Sometimes observations also contradict our uncontroversial beliefs, but we shouldn't always reject our uncontroversial beliefs without a better alternative – a new set of plausible beliefs to replace them. For example, Newtan's theory of physics was contradicted by some observations, but scientists still believed it was true until Einstein provided scientists with a new

scientific theory that was a clear improvement. And even now there are observations that seem to conflict Einstein's theory of physics, but scientists don't reject Einstein's theory.

When we hold incoherent beliefs we have a reason to feel less certain about our beliefs, but that doesn't mean our beliefs should all be rejected.

Third, **observation** is relevant to our moral beliefs. We experience that pain is bad (in some sense), and that experience is an observation that seems to support the hypothesis that all pain is bad.

Fourth, a hypothesis is successful at making risky **predictions** is more likely to be true. If I hypothesize that all pain is bad, then my predictions succeed until I observe that some pain isn't bad. Of course, interpreting these observations can be difficult. I don't think masochism is an example of experiencing that pain itself as good. Both pain and pleasure can be simultaneously experienced—and physical and emotional pain (or pleasure) are also two different aspects to our experiences. Masochism could be an experience of physical pain and emotional pleasure.

Fifth, the belief that all pain is bad is much more **comprehensive** than believing that the pain of touching fire is bad. If all pain is bad, then we could use that fact to help us do a great deal of moral reasoning as opposed to merely realizing that burning pain is bad.

Sixth, the fact that a theory is simple counts in its favor and the fact that it's complex counts against it. Simple moral truths, such as "it's usually wrong to hurt people" give us more more plausible hypotheses than much more complex moral truths, such as, "it's usually wrong to torture people, to punch people, to kick people, to stab people, to steal from people, and to shoot people." The simple moral truth can determine that all of these other actions are wrong and more. Additionally, the simple moral truth has fewer assumptions. We assume all of those actions are examples of hurting people, but we might find out that stealing isn't technically hurting people. It is safer

to have fewer assumptions rather than more, and simple truths have fewer assumptions.

Chapter 11: Moral Reason

Not all moral beliefs are equal. Although some people might think it's impossible to argue about morality or have reasonable moral beliefs, philosophers almost always think we can. We should prefer moral beliefs that are reasonable to those that are unreasonable and those that are probably true rather than probably false. I will explain how we can come up with moral arguments in order to have the most reasonable moral beliefs possible. In particular, I will discuss the following elements of moral reason:

5. Uncontroversial moral truths
6. Analogies
7. Theoretical virtues
8. Thought experiments

Uncontroversial moral truths

There are many highly plausible moral truths that people tend to agree with, such as the following:

1. Suffering is bad.
2. Happiness is good.
3. If it is wrong for someone to do something in a situation, then it is wrong for anyone to do it in an identical situation.
4. It always or almost always wrong to torture children.
5. It is often wrong to steal from people.

Such truths are sometimes called "moral truisms." These truths are often taken for granted during moral reasoning. Such reasoning can be explicitly and clearly stated in the form of moral arguments, such as the following:

1. It is always or almost always wrong to torture children.
2. Whipping the neighbor's child would be a case of torturing a

child.
3. I have no reason to think that whipping the neighbor's child would be the right thing to do.
4. Therefore, whipping the neighbor's child is probably wrong.

The above argument uses a moral truth (it is always or almost always wrong to torture children) and combines that with two other uncontroversial facts to lead us to a moral conclusion (whipping the neighbor's child is wrong).

Moral reasoning doesn't require that we prove absolutely everything. It would be absurd to think that everyone has to know why torturing children is always or almost always wrong. It's just obvious. We can use uncontroversial truths to lead us to moral conclusions. (Compare this to mathematical knowledge. I know that 2+2=4 even though I don't know why it's true.)

However, it might be possible to learn about "why torturing children is always or almost always wrong" through other uncontroversial truths. For example:

1. We know that suffering is *bad* because we have experienced it.
2. All things equal, we know it is *wrong* to cause bad things to happen.
3. Therefore, all things equal, it's wrong to cause suffering.
4. Torture causes suffering.
5. Therefore, all things equal, torture is wrong.

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Chapter 12: Normative Moral Theories

Normative theories of ethics or "moral theories" are meant to help us figure out what actions are right and wrong. Popular normative theories include utilitarianism, the categorical imperative, Aristotelian virtue ethics, Stoic virtue ethics, and W. D. Ross's intuitionism. I will discuss each of these theories and explain how to apply them in various situations.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a very simple view that matches common sense – right and wrong can be determined by a cost-benefit analysis. We must consider all the good and bad consequences when deciding if an action is right. Utilitarians disagree about what counts as "good" or "bad." Some think that fulfilling desires is good and thwarting desires is bad, classic utilitarians think that happiness is good and suffering is bad, and pluralists believe that there are multiple "intrinsic goods" that are worth promoting. **An action will then be said to be "right" as long as it satisfactorily causes good consequences compared to alternative actions, and it will be "wrong" if it doesn't.**

Utilitarianism doesn't discriminate or encourage egoism. It is wrong to harm others to benefit yourself because everyone counts.

What counts as "satisfactory" will not be agreed upon by all philosophers. Originally some philosophers suggested that only the "best" action we could possibly perform is "right," but this is an extreme, impractical, and oppressive view. Why? Whenever you are taking a shower or spending time with friends it would probably be better to be doing something else, such as helping the needy, but it is absurd to say that you are always doing wrong whenever you are taking a shower or spending time with friends. Additionally, it isn't clear that there is a "best" course of action always available to us. There might be an unlimited number of actions we can perform and at

least one of them could be better than what we choose to do.

It should be pointed out that right actions and right moral decisions are two different things. An action is right when it produces good results even if it was made for the wrong reasons. For example, I could decide not to go to my job one day when doing so would just happen to cause a car crash. There is no way to expect a car crash to occur that day, but my action would be right insofar would cause positive results. People might then say, "You got lucky and ended up doing the right thing."

To make the right moral decision for a utilitarian means to make a decision that is most likely going to actually be right (lead to good results) based on the available information I have. Choosing to go to work is usually the right decision to make despite the fact that there is a negligible chance that I will get in a car wreck. Such a decision can't take far-fetched possibilities into consideration.

Utilitarianism is not necessarily meant to be used as a "decision procedure" to decide what to do. If we can clearly know that a course of action will produce highly good results and negligible bad results, then that action is rational. However, we aren't always good at knowing what actions will produce good results and we can often be overconfident in our ability to do so. It is often wrong to choose to do something we believe will probably have good results if that behavior is risky and has a chance of hurting people. For example, a jury shouldn't find someone guilty when someone has been proven innocent in the hopes that it will prevent a riot in the streets because people can't know for sure that such a decision will produce the desired results, and they do know that the guilty verdict will destroy someone's life.

To conclude, in order to know if something is morally preferable for a utilitarian, we must ask, "Will it lead to more benefits and less harms than the alternatives?" If the answer is, Yes, then it is morally preferable.

Applying Utilitarianism

Killing people – Killing people is usually wrong either because people have value (and they might not exist after dying), because everyone has a desire to stay alive, or because killing people makes other people unhappy.

Stealing – Stealing is usually wrong because it makes people unhappy to lose their possessions, they might need their possessions to accomplish certain important goals, and because the right to property makes it possible for us to make long term goals involving our possessions.

Courage – Courage is essential for morality because people must be willing to do what they believe will be right even at a personal cost. Sometimes doing the right thing requires altruism, such as when a whistle blower must tell the American public about corruption at the work place (despite the fact that she might face retaliation for doing so).

Education – Education is good because it helps us know how to be a productive member of society, it helps us know empirical facts that are relevant to knowing which actions are likely to benefit or cause harm (e.g. better parenting techniques or healthy eating), and it helps us think rationally to make better decisions.

Promising – It is wrong to break a promise because doing so would make other people upset and waste their time. People depend on the honesty of others in order to take business risks, plan on their retirement, and so on.

Polluting – It is wrong to pollute if the pollution will harm others. It is preferable to refuse to pollute if too many people doing so could also harm others, but we are not necessarily personally responsible for the harms caused by an entire civilization.

Homosexual behavior – Homosexual behavior does not automatically cause harm and it is something many people find pleasurable and part

of living a happy life. Therefore, it is not always wrong. Homosexuality can cause someone harm from discrimination, but to blame homosexuality for the harms of discrimination is a form of blaming the victim just like blaming a woman who gets raped for being too weak.

Atheism –Atheism does not necessarily cause people harm other than through discrimination, but blaming atheists for discrimination is also a form of blaming the victim. Additionally, atheism is often a position one believes in because of good arguments, and it is appropriate for people to have beliefs based on good arguments. Being "reasonable" is "right" because it tends to have good results.

Objections

1. **Consequences might not be enough.** – Utilitarianism requires us to do whatever promotes the good the most, but that could require us to be disrespectful or even harm certain people. For example, if we kill someone to donate their organs and save five lives, then it seems like our action maximized the good and wasn't wrong. This result is counterintitive and it's suggests that utilitarianism is incomplete because we might have rights that must not be violated, even to maximize the good.
2. **Utilitarians aren't sensitive to heroic acts.** – Utilitarians think we ought to maximize the good. If this is a duty, then it seems much too demanding. In that case we would probably be doing something morally wrong almost every second of the day, and we would rightly be blamed and punished for it. But it doesn't seem wrong for me to do a handstand or spend time with friends just because I could be doing something better with my time. Additionally, heroic acts like jumping into a fire to save a child seem like they are *beyond the call of duty* rather than obligations. If it's not a duty to maximize the good, then utilitarians will have to explain when we have duties and when we don't. It's not obvious that we can draw this line using utilitarianism.

Categorical Imperative

The categorical imperative asks us to act in a way that we can will to be a universal law. In other words, it asks us to **behave in a rational way that would be rational for anyone**. If it is right for me to defend myself when attacked, then it is right for everyone to defend themselves in self defense.

[Robert Johnson](#) describes the categorical imperative as a method to find out if an action is permissible using four steps:

First, formulate a maxim that enshrines your reason for acting as you propose. Second, recast that maxim as a universal law of nature governing all rational agents, and so as holding that all must, by natural law, act as you yourself propose to act in these circumstances. Third, consider whether your maxim is even conceivable in a world governed by this law of nature. If it is, then, fourth, ask yourself whether you would, or could, rationally *will* to act on your maxim in such a world. If you could, then your action is morally permissible.[12]

I will describe each of these stages in more detail:

1. First we formulate the "maxim" or motivational principle that guides our action. For example, I might plan on eating food because I'm hungry or decide to break a promise to pay a friend back because I would rather keep the money.
2. Second, let's transform the action into a universal law of nature. Everyone must act for the same reason that I will act on. Everyone will eat food when they're hungry and break their promises to friends when they would rather keep their money.
3. Third, let's consider if such a maxim could even be a universal law of nature. Could everyone eat food when they're hungry? Yes. Could everyone refuse to pay their debts when they'd rather keep their money? No, because that would undermine the whole point of having debts to be paid. No one would lend money in

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12 Johnson, Robert. "Kant's Moral Philosophy." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 17 May 2011. (Section 5, The Formula of the Universal Law of Nature.) Last updated 2008.

that world. At this point we can already rule out the maxim of refusing to pay our debts out of convenience, so it's an irrational and impermissible maxim and we have a duty not to act from that motive.

4. Fourth, if the maxim passes the third step, could we *rationally* will the maxim to be followed by everyone in our circumstances? Perhaps I can will that people eat when they are hungry, but not necessarily in every circumstance, such as when there's limited food that needs to be shared with others who are also hungry.

Johnson adds that we have a "perfect duty" to refrain from doing something that violates the third step in the sense that there are no exceptions. Whenever we are in the relevant situation, we must refrain from doing the act as much as possible. Since refusing to pay one's debts when we prefer to keep our money doesn't pass the third step, we have a perfect duty not to refuse to pay our debts for that reason. Kant also thinks we have a prefect duty not to commit suicide when we want to avoid suffering.

If we have a maxim that doesn't pass the fourth step, then it's an imperfect duty to refrain from doing it, which means we must refrain from doing it at least some of the time. Kant thinks we can't always refrain from helping others, so we have a duty to help others at least some of the time.

I suspect that the categorical imperative is compatible with all other moral theories. For example, a utilitarian will have to believe that it is *only rational* to behave in a way likely to promote positive values, and such moral rationality applies to everyone.

Of course, the categorical imperative doesn't require us to be utilitarians. There might be some actions that are right for reasons other than the likelihood of producing positive results.

The categorical imperative is often related to hypocrisy, the golden rule, and the question, "What if everyone did that?" First, our morality must not be hypocritical—what is right for me is right for everyone.

Second, we can demand that someone treat others how she wants to be treated as long as she "wants" to be treated in a way that rationality permits. Third, we can demand that people don't behave in a way that is wrong for others. If "everyone defended themselves from attack," then people would be behaving appropriately. However, "if everyone steals to benefit themselves," then they will be doing something wrong. When we ask, "What if everyone did that?" we are not asking, "Would there be bad consequences if everyone did X?" The categorical imperative does not necessarily concern itself with consequences and it doesn't claim that something is wrong just because too many people doing something could become destructive.

In order to know if an action is morally acceptable based on the categorical imperative we must ask, "Is the action rationally appropriate for everyone else in the same situation?" If the answer is, Yes, then the action is morally acceptable.

Applying the categorical imperative

Killing people – Killing people is wrong whenever it would be inappropriate for someone to kill us. It would be wrong for people to kill us just to take our money, so it is wrong for everyone to kill to take people's money. However, it would be right for someone to kill us if necessary to defend themselves from attack, so it is right for everyone else as well.

Stealing – Stealing is wrong whenever it would be inappropriate for someone to steal from us, such as when they want something without paying for it. However, if stealing is necessary to survive because no one is willing to share food, then it might be necessary to steal.

Courage – Courage is rationally necessary for us to be willing to do the right thing when the right thing is done at personal risk to oneself.

Education – Education is a rational requirement insofar as ignorance puts others at risk. If we can rationally demand others to become educated because of the dangers of ignorance, then we are also

rationally required to become educated.

Promising – Keeping a promise is a rational requirement insofar as we can rationally demand that other people keep their promises. It might be that breaking a promise is necessary from time to time, but only when it would be wrong for anyone in that situation to break the promise. For example, a enraged friend who asks for his gun you are borrowing should be denied the weapon. It is perfectly respectful to deny someone out of their mind a weapon because they will appreciate it later once they regain their reason.

Polluting – Although "everyone polluting by driving cars" causes harm, it isn't clear that polluting is always wrong just like "everyone committing their life to medicine" would end up causing harm. However, it might be wrong to cause pollution whenever we know that it will cause harm. If we can rationally demand a business to pollute less, then others can make the same demand on us.

Homosexual behavior – If having sex for pleasure can be rational for heterosexuals, then having sex for pleasure can be rational for homosexuals. We can't argue that homosexuality is immoral because it is unnatural any more than we can argue that driving a car or walking on our hands are immoral because they are unnatural.

Atheism – Someone can rationally believe in atheism if it is found to be a sufficiently reasonable belief just like all other beliefs. If it is rational to believe in theism if it is found to be sufficiently reasonable, and it can be rational to believe in atheism for the same reason.

Objections

1. **The categorical imperative isn't meant to be a *complete* decision procedure.** – Kant discusses the categorical imperative in the context of moral *concepts* rather than moral *reality*. Even if the categorical imperative exists, it's not always clear how to use it to decide what we ought to do in each unique situation we find ourselves in. Many people disagree about how the categorical

imperative applies in each situation.

2. **We don't know that categorical imperatives can help us.** – Kant thinks if we can have moral worth, then we can be motivated by categorical imperatives, but it's not clear that we can have moral worth or be motivated by categorical imperatives. The problem is that we don't know how we are motivated in each situation and we often deceive ourselves. If we can't be motivated by categorical imperatives, then we need to know how practical they are. Will they help us be moral in any important sense?

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Aristotelian virtue ethics has two parts. **First, Aristotle argues that our personal [happiness](#) (flourishing) is the ultimate goal that we should promote. Second, he argues that we should learn to have habits and behave in ways that lead to our personal happiness.** (To have the right habits and feelings is to be virtuous.) We can learn what behaviors cause happiness through our past behavior and we can learn to be sensitive to particularities in each situation. For example, we know not to attack people in most situations, but it might be necessary to attack people in self defense.

In order to know if something is morally acceptable for an Aristotelian we must ask, "Is the action based on a sensitivity to the situation? And does the action lead to personal happiness?" If the answer to these questions is, Yes, then the action is morally virtuous.

Two clarifications still need to be made. First, Aristotle's idea of "happiness" is distinct from pleasure and means something more like "good life" or "flourishing. Second, some of our goals could be morally justified for Aristotle as long as they don't conflict with happiness. Pleasure, knowledge, and virtue in particular seem like worthwhile goals in general, even if they don't cause happiness. Additionally, Aristotle argues that *virtue is the greatest form of happiness.* Happiness is the ultimate goal or "ultimate and most final end," but there can be other worthy goals or "final ends." (Final ends

are goals that are worth pursuing and desiring for their own sake.)

Aristotle, like most virtue ethicists, is skeptical about using rules to make moral decisions. It seems impractical to use rules and philosophical arguments to make decisions every second of the day, even if morality is ultimately grounded in rules. Instead of having rules, we need to learn to have an intuitive understanding of morality and develop "virtuous" character traits that cause appropriate behavior without a great deal of thought usually being required. A person who has an intuitive understanding of morality and has virtuous character traits has practical wisdom (the ability to achieve worthy goals) but not necessarily theoretical wisdom (the ability to know about the world through generalization and deduction).

Although Aristotle doesn't think ethics is best understood in terms of rules, he finds that wisdom tends to be based on avoiding extremes and finding a moderate middle ground—the golden mean. A person with *cowardice* is afraid, even when she should not be afraid. A person with *foolhardiness* isn't afraid, even when she should be. A virtuous person with *courage* will only be afraid when it's appropriate to be.

Some people define courage as an ability to act despite fear. Perhaps there are times when we should endanger ourselves, even when it's appropriate to feel fear. For example, it could be courageous to jump in a burning building to save a child, even though it might make sense to feel fear insofar as our own well being would be threatened. Aristotle argues that even the ultimate self-sacrifice isn't necessarily incompatible with our personal happiness, but that is a very controversial point. However, even if it can be appropriate to feel fear and act despite our fear, courage is merely more complex than Aristotle stated *because the fact that we feel fear doesn't guarantee inaction*.

Aristotle's idea of finding the golden mean is a general rule, and we can use it make many other general rules. Virtues like courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom could be taken to imply various general rules of avoiding certain extremes. We shouldn't eat too much

food, we should eat, desire, and enjoy food when it's appropriate, but not when it's inappropriate, and so on.

Applying Aristotle's virtue ethics

Killing people – It might be necessary to kill people in self defense because living is necessary to be happy (and we must promote goods that are necessary for our personal happiness), but killing people makes us unhappy because we are social animals and we care about people. We don't like horrible things to happen to others.

Stealing – Stealing is necessary if it is necessary for our personal happiness, but stealing makes us unhappy insofar as we care about people.

Courage – Courage is necessary for us to take the risks needed to live a fully happy life. Courage is our habit to be afraid when it is necessary for our happiness and not afraid when it is necessary for our happiness.

Education – Education is necessary for our personal happiness not only to know how to best be happy, but also because the most intellectual forms of contemplation are the most positive experiences we can have. A "contemplative life" is the happiest sort of life we can live.

Promising – Keeping a promise is virtuous as long as we consider the situation at hand and keep the promise because it is likely to promote our happiness. In other words, keeping the promise might not be personally beneficial because we can also keep a promise out of respect (care) for the other person. We can't be happy while hurting others.

Polluting – Polluting is wrong insofar as it hurts people and we care about people.

Homosexual behavior – Homosexual behavior is wrong when done immoderately (in an overly-dangerous way likely to lead to

unhappiness), but it is right when done in a way that leads to one's personal fulfillment.

Atheism – Atheism is right as long as the belief is not under our control or as long as the belief does not lead to our unhappiness. Atheists often can't control their atheism just like they can't believe in many other things that they find implausible (ghosts, ESP, bigfoot, etc.).

Objections

1. **It's not just our personal happiness that matters.** – First, it's not obvious that happiness is the ultimate good. Perhaps our existence is more important. Second, it's not obvious that we should only be concerned with our personal good or happiness. It seems plausible to think that everyone's happiness should be taken into consideration.
2. **Caring for others isn't always good for our happiness.** – Aristotle thinks we care for others by our very nature, so we should take other people's good into consideration. However, we don't always care about *strangers* and it's not obvious that we should nurture our empathy for strangers given Aristotle's assumption that our personal happiness is the ultimate good. It can be painful to care for others because their suffering can cause suffering for us, and we might have some control over how much we care for others and strangers in particular.

Stoic Virtue Ethics

Simply put, Stoic virtue ethics is a theory that **true moral beliefs and thoughts tend to lead to appropriate emotions and actions**. However, Stoic virtue ethics traditionally has five parts:

1. It argues that virtue is the ultimate value that overrides all other values.
2. It defines virtue in terms of having true evaluative beliefs,

emotions based on those evaluative beliefs, and behaving according to those evaluative beliefs. (Evaluative beliefs are value judgments, such as "pleasure is preferable.")

3. It states that true (or well reasoned) evaluative beliefs and thoughts tend to give us appropriate emotions and actions. Positive evaluative beliefs lead to positive emotional responses and negative evaluative beliefs lead to negative emotional responses.

4. It states that we can know what is "preferable" from our instincts, which was given to us from God (Universal Reason). In particular, we have an impulse to care for others both emotionally and through action, which indicates the fact that "caring for others is preferable."

5. It states that everything that happens is for the best because it was preordained by God (Universal Reason) and therefore there is no reason for us to have a negative emotional response.

The first three of these parts sounds reasonable, but the last two require us to accept the existence of the Stoic divinity, which is something contemporary philosophers find to be much too ambitious. What we need is a way to determine is truths about preferences. I have two different suggestions for finding them without referring to a divinity:

1. We can prefer whatever is necessary to be virtuous. No matter what we value, we can't promote the value unless we value life, consciousness, and freedom from pain.

2. We can experience some values for ourselves, such as the value of pleasure and disvalue of pain.

I discuss these solutions in much more detail in my Master's Thesis, [Two New Kinds of Stoicism](). My theories are known as "Neo-Aristonianism" and "Common Sense Stoicism."

In order to determine if something is morally acceptable for a Stoic philosopher we need to ask, "What emotions are being felt and what beliefs are held?" If an emotion is caused by rational beliefs, then it is

morally acceptable.

Applying Stoic virtue ethics

Killing people – It is wrong to kill people insofar as killing people is motivated by inappropriate beliefs and thoughts, such as, "This person stole my wallet and deserves to die." Such a belief could motivate rage and we could lose rational control of ourselves. Instead, we should dispassionately consider why killing could be appropriate based on rational preferences. For example, it might be appropriate to kill in self defense if necessary for our preference for survival despite the fact that we ought to care about all people and prefer for good things to happen to others.

Stealing – It is wrong to steal insofar as it is motivated by inappropriate beliefs and thoughts, such as, "I need to have more money." It might be necessary to steal to act on sufficiently important rational preference, such as a preference to survive when stealing is needed to survive; but pleasure would not be an important enough preference worth promoting to warrant theft. For one thing we care for others and don't like others to suffer theft, and the expectation of pleasure would not override the importance of helping rather than harming others.

Courage – The ancient Stoics believed that courage was a lack of fear. We can be cautious and prefer to live well without fearing death or losing our external goods. The Stoics believed that the fear of death was based on an inappropriate belief that death is an evil (despite the fact that it is dis-preferable).

Education – First, education can help us attain good reasoning, which helps us form better (well justified and accurate) beliefs. Second, well justified and accurate beliefs help lead to appropriate emotions and actions.

Promising – Keeping a promise is virtuous as long as we do so based upon justified preferences. We should not break a promise just

because we are compelled to do something more pleasurable because that would overemphasize the importance of pleasure and de-emphasize the value of the person that would be disrespected or harmed.

Polluting – To pollute to the extent of harming others is often based on inappropriate selfishness, greed, and an inappropriate lack of care for others. The virtuous person will care for others and won't want to harm them for money. It might be worth driving a car in a society where cars help live a better life despite the fact that the pollution ends up harming some people.

Homosexual behavior – Homosexual behavior insofar as it is based on a preference for pleasure is appropriate as long as it is compatible with our care for others. An inappropriate love of pleasure could cause inappropriate lust that would cloud our judgment whether we are talking about homosexual or heterosexual sex.

Atheism – Atheism is appropriate insofar as the belief is probably true based on the information available to us. For the Stoic philosopher, true beliefs are of primary importance. We should have a belief because it is true, not because it is pleasurable or because of our emotions.

Objections

1. **Does Universal Reason exist?** – The Stoics require us to believe in Universal Reason, but not everyone believes in universal reason and it's not obvious that Universal Reason really exists.
2. **The Stoic virtue ethics can dull our emotions.** – It's not entirely clear what emotions are appropriate for the Stoics, but some people think they would dismiss many appropriate emotions that enrich our lives. Grief, passionate love, and anger were often said to be inappropriate emotions by the Stoics, but many people aren't convinced that they are inappropriate.

Ross's Intuitionism

[W. D. Ross](#)'s theoretical understanding of morality explained in [The Right and the Good](#) was not meant to be comprehensive and determine right and wrong in every situation, but he doesn't think it is ever going to be possible to do so. He denies that there is one single overarching moral principle or rule. Instead, he thinks we can make moral progress one step at a time by learning more and more about our moral duties, and do our best at balancing conflicting obligations and values.

Ross proposes that (a) we have self-evident prima facie moral duties, and (b) some things have intrinsic value.

Prima facie duties

We have various prima facie duties, such as the duty of non-injury (the duty to not harm people) and the duty of beneficence (to help people). These duties are "prima facie" because they can be overriden. Duties can determine what we ought to do "nothing else considered" but they don't determine what we ought to do all things considered. Whatever we ought to do all things considered will override any other conflicting duties. For example, the promise to kill someone would give us a prima facie duty to fulfill our promise, but it would be overridden by our duty not to injure others.

Ross argues that we have (at the very least) the following duties:

1. **Duty of fidelity** – The duty to keep our promises.
2. **Duty of reparation** – The duty to try to pay for the harm we do to others.
3. **Duty of gratitude** – The duty to return favors and services given to us by others.
4. **Duty of beneficence** – The duty to maximize the good (things of intrinsic value).
5. **Duty of noninjury** – The duty to refuse to harm others.

Is this list complete? That is not obvious. We might have a duty to *respect* people beyond these duties, and we might have a duty to justice, equality, and/or fairness to praise, blame, reward, punish, and distribute goods according to merit. For example, it's unfair and disrespectful to blame innocent people because they don't merit blame —they weren't responsible for the immoral act.

Self-evidence and intuition

Ross thinks we can know moral facts through intuition. What does it mean for these duties to be *self-evident*? It means that we can contemplate the duties and *know* they are true based on that contemplation—but only if we contemplate them in the right way. Ross compares moral self-evidence to the self-evidence of mathematical axioms. A mathematical axiom that seems to fit the bill is the law of non-contradiction—We know that something can't be true and false at the same time.

Intuition is the way contemplation can lead to knowledge of self-evidence. We often use the word "intuition" to refer to things we consider "common sense" or things we know that are difficult to prove using argumentation. Ross thinks we can know things without arguing for them, and he thinks that anything "truly intuitive" is self-evident. Keep in mind that intuition doesn't necessarily let us know that something is self-evident immediately nor that intuitive contemplation is infallible. Consider that "123+321=444" could be self-evident. We might need to reach a certain maturity to know that this mathematical statement is true, and recognition of its truth is not necessarily immediate. It requires familiarity with addition and some people will need to spend more time contemplating than others.

Intrinsic value

Many utilitarians agree with Ross that pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad. Pleasure is "good just for existing" and is worthy of being a goal. The decision to eat candy to attain pleasure "makes sense" if it has intrinsic value, and we all seem to think that

eating candy to attain pleasure is at least sometimes a good enough reason to justify such an act. We have prima facie duties not to harm people at least to the extent that it causes something intrinsically bad (pain) and to help people at least to the extent that it produces something intrinsically good, like pleasure.

What's intrinsically good? Ross suggests that justice, knowledge, virtue, and "innocent pleasure" are all intrinsically good. However, [minds, human life, and certain animal life](#) could also have intrinsic value.

How do we use Ross's intuitionism?

First, we need to determine our duties and what has intrinsic value. Second, we need to determine if any of these duties or values conflict in our current situation. If so, we need to find a way to decide which duty is overriding. For example, I can decide to go to the dentist and get a cavity removed and this will cause me pain, but it is likely that it will help me avoid even more pain in the future. Therefore, it seems clear that I ought to get the cavity removed. However, if I have two friends who both want to borrow my car at the same time and I won't be needing it for a while, I might have to choose between them and decide which friend needs the car the most or randomly decide between them if that's impossible.

Applying Ross's Intuitionism

Killing people – It is generally wrong to kill people because it (a) causes people pain, (b) prevents them from feeling future pleasure, and (c) destroys their knowledge. If and when killing people isn't wrong, we will need an overriding reason to do it. Perhaps it can be right to kill someone if it's necessary to save many other lives.

Stealing – It is wrong to steal insofar as it causes people pain, but it might be morally preferable to steal than to die. Our duties to our children could also justify stealing when it's the only option to feed them.

Courage – Virtue has intrinsic value, and courage is one specific kind of virtue. Courage is our ability to be motivated to do whatever it is we ought to do all things considered, even when we might risk our own well being in the process.

Education – Knowledge has intrinsic value, so we have a prima facie duty to educate people and seek education for ourselves.

Promising – Keeping a promise is already a prima facie duty, but it can be easily overriden when more important duties conflict with it. For example, you could promise to meet a friend for lunch, but your prima facie duty to help others might override your promise when a stranger is injured and you can help out.

Polluting – Polluting violates people's prima facie duty to noninjury, but polluting might be necessary for people to attain certain goods they need to live. In that case pollution could be appropriate.

Homosexual behavior – Homosexual behavior can be justified because it can help people attain pleasure, but we also have a prima facie duty to try not to endanger our own life or the life of others, so it's better to take certain precautions rather than have homosexual sex indiscriminately. This is no different than the morality of heterosexual sex.

Atheism – Being an atheist doesn't violate any of our prima facie duties, so it's not wrong. Telling one's parents that one is an atheist could cause momentary pain, but one's prima facie duties to be open and honest seems to override that concern in most situations. Additionally, being open and honest in public about one's atheism could risk one's own well being, but it could also help create acceptance for atheists in general and help other atheists as a consequence.

Objections

1. **It's not clear that intuitions are reliable.** – I've mentioned before

that both intuition and self-evidence has been questioned by philosophers. Many people have differing intuitions and argue different beliefs qualify as being "self-evident."

2. **It's not clear how we resolve conflicts in duties.** – Many philosophers don't think we can have duties that conflict. For example, utilitarians think we should maximize the good and no moral consideration that conflicts with that principle will count for anything. If our duties can conflict, then it's not obvious how we can decide which duty is overridden by the other.

Conclusion

Philosophers have found ethical theories useful because they help us decide why various actions are right and wrong. If it is generally wrong to punch someone then it is wrong to kick them for the same reason. We can then generalize that it is wrong to "harm" people to help understand why punching and kicking tend to both be wrong, which helps us decide whether or not various other actions and institutions are wrong, such as capital punishment, abortion, homosexuality, atheism, and so forth.

All of the ethical theories above have various strengths and it is possible that more than one of them is true (or at least accurate). Not all moral theories are necessarily incompatible. Imagine that utilitarianism, the categorical imperative, and Stoic virtue ethics are all true. In that case true evaluative beliefs (e.g. human life is preferable) would tell us which values to promote (e.g. human life), and we would be more likely to have an emotional response that would motivate us to actually promote the value. We would feel more satisfied about human life being promoted (e.g. through a cure to cancer) and dissatisfied about human life being destroyed (e.g. through war). Finally, what is right for one person would be right for everyone else in a sufficiently similar situation because the same reasons will justify the same actions.

III. Applied Ethics

Chapter 9: Reckless Driving

Reckless driving is becoming so common place that I can't drive for 10 miles without expecting to personally experience reckless driving that endangers my safety. We can use philosophy to correct our own behavior, but some sort of change in culture may be required to correct the behavior of others. There are three forms of reckless driving that I have noticed to be on the rise, and I will consider why they happen:

1. Tailgating
2. Blocking paths
3. Lane sharing

If the Stoic philosophers are correct, then each of these forms of reckless driving are based on our evaluative assumptions and emotions, which tend to be based on the fact that we are in a hurry to get somewhere.

Tailgating

Tailgating is driving too close to the car in front of you. A common group of assumptions by people who tailgate are the following:

1. I need to get somewhere as fast as possible.
2. Someone is driving too slow.
3. Tailgating will speed them up.
4. The benefit involved outweighs the risks.
5. The other people's lives involved don't count.

If these assumptions were correct, then tailgating would be perfectly rational. I think it's pretty obvious that tailgating is too dangerous to

allow and some of these assumptions are wrong.

One, the benefit does not outweigh the risks. Getting somewhere a bit faster could be necessary in a life or death situation (e.g. someone needs to get to the hospital before bleeding to death), but this is not why most people are tailgating. The risks to tailgating involve car accidents and offending other drivers. Tailgating is disrespectful to others and does not treat them as human beings.

The benefit of tailgating does not outweigh the risk, so tailgating will no longer be a rational activity. People need to stop doing it.

Two, it is false that other people's lives don't count. Other human beings are real and their lives have a great deal of value. The fact that we feel disconnected from others (or don't feel like they are real) could be some sort of cultural phenomenon.

"Tailgating should be illegal" is something just about everyone agrees with. They don't want other people to tailgate them. The assumption that "I count, but you don't" is required for anyone to decide to tailgate, but couldn't possibly be a true assumption. Even if I really was the only person of value in the world, I couldn't expect anyone else to know that.

Blocking paths

When someone needs to merge lanes, you are supposed to let them get in front of you. You aren't supposed to try to "block their path" by speeding up to make sure they have no room. I have had cars speed up to try to block my path while I was merging into another lane. There isn't a lot of time to decide if it is no longer safe to merge lanes while you are merging into a lane, but blocking someone's path will always involve that risk. You might not block their path fast enough. Even if you did block their path fast enough, they might still not notice and merge right into your car. You are supposed to keep your distance to cars, even if they are in the lane next to you because you never know

when someone will want to merge into your lane without warning.

Common assumptions people have when they want to block your path are the following:

1. I need to get somewhere as fast as possible.
2. A car wants to merge in front of me, but that would slow me down.
3. If I speed up and block their path, then they will merge in front of someone else behind me.
4. The benefit involved with blocking a path outweighs the risks.
5. The other person (who wants to change lands) doesn't count.
6. The other person doesn't deserve to get to change lanes.

Blocking the path of others who need to merge lanes is obviously wrong and some of the common assumptions are false. Some of these false assumptions are the same as those tailgaters have (The benefit attained does not outweigh the risks, and the other person does count.) Moreover, the other person does deserve to get to change lanes. People need to change lanes to get out of an "exit lane" on the freeway, to get to turn left onto a street, and so forth.

If any of these assumptions are false, then blocking the path of cars that need to merge lanes is no longer rational. People should stop doing it.

Additionally, almost everyone would agree that there should be a rule against blocking paths. We don't want anyone to be allowed to bock our path, so we shouldn't be allowed to block the path of others.

I have read that some people want you to thank them when you allow them to merge lanes. This is ridiculous. It isn't "good of you" to allow someone to merge lanes, it's required. It shouldn't be allowed to disallow them from merging lanes. Moreover, it could be dangerous to expect someone to wave at you while driving, which is just one more distraction.

Lane sharing

One of the most common problems I have encountered when driving is another car driving in the same lane I am in. This is especially common after two lanes become one. The other person either miscalculates the fact that one lane will become two, or they just don't want you to be in front of them, so they drive around you while in the same lane as you. I have even seen cars drive off-road to drive around me, and I don't even drive slowly. Lane sharing is so outrageous that I couldn't find any information about it online. It is pretty obvious that there is a law against driving side-by-side with another car on the same lane. Each lane is meant to only have one car on it at a time. Common assumptions of people who share lanes are the following:

1. I need to get somewhere as fast as possible.
2. A car in front of me will slow me down.
3. I can drive around the car in front of me while sharing the same lane in order to have one less car in front of me.
4. The benefit involved with sharing lanes outweighs the risks.
5. The person in front of me doesn't count.
6. The person in front of me doesn't deserve to be in front of me.

These assumptions parallel those of people who block paths and some of them are false for the same reasons. The benefit does not outweigh the risks, the person in front of you does count, and the person in front of you does deserve to be in front of you. All three assumptions are required to justify lane sharing. If the benefit doesn't outweigh the risk, then we shouldn't share lanes. If the person in front of you counts, then we shouldn't risk their life or show disrespect towards him or her. If the people in front of you deserves to be there just as much as you do, then there is no reason to take that way from them. Additionally, everyone would agree that sharing lanes should be illegal. If it shouldn't be allowed for others, then it shouldn't be allowed for ourselves. Even if we are personally more important than anyone else, we couldn't expect anyone else on the road to know that.

Conclusion

There are many forms of reckless driving and they all have similar assumptions. It is very common to disregard the interest of others and to disregard the risks involved with our actions. If we can change our assumptions, then we can change how we think and feel while driving, which will modify our actions for the better.

Although it might be occasionally difficult to change our personal behavior, it is even harder to change the behavior of anyone else. The stupidity of people at large could be caused by our culture, poor education, and alienation.

Chapter 10: Is Atheism Immoral?

Atheists are one of the most hated groups in the United States. Many religious people openly admit they think that *atheism is immoral*. I will argue that atheism is not immoral. First, I will give some evidence that atheists are despised. Second, I will describe two ways people think atheism is immoral. Third, I will provide arguments that atheism is not immoral. Fourth, I will take a look at arguments people use to conclude that atheism is immoral. If we have good reason to believe that atheism can be morally permissible (rational from an individual's standpoint) and we have no reason to think atheism is immoral, then we should agree that atheism is not immoral.

Atheists are despised.

The fact that atheists are *commonly* despised is well supported by polls and scientific research. [A study by the University of Minnesota](#) found that 47.6% of Americans disapprove of a marriage between their child and an atheist.[13] (This can be compared to 33.5% of Americans who disapprove of their child marrying a Muslim.) We should approve of our children marrying a person who identifies with any racial or religious group as long as the individual is a good person. I suppose being an atheist or Muslim is believed to automatically disqualify you from being a good person.

[A gallop poll conducted in 2007](#) also found out that only 45% of Americans would vote for a well qualified atheist for president.[14] (This can be compared to 55% of Americans would would vote for a well qualified homosexual for president.) Again, we should vote for the most qualified candidate. I suppose atheism and homosexuality are taken to automatically disqualify you from being qualified.

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13 Paulos, John Allen. "Who's Counting: Distrusting Atheists." 26 July 2010.
    <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=1786422&page=1>. Published April 2, 2006.
14 Jones , Jeffrey M. 26 July 2010. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26611/some-americans-reluctant-vote-mormon-72yearold-presidential-candidates.aspx>. Published February 20, 2007.

Not only is atheism despised by many people, but it is often *openly* despised. The Catholic Church officially states that atheism is a violation of the first commandment—Do not have any Gods before me. This is taken to mean, "Worship me, and no other Gods." There are also websites that also provide arguments (or assertions) that atheism is immoral. For example, DailyMorality.com[15] and Kreitsauce's Musings[16]

Finally, the hatred against atheists have lead to intolerant behavior. Many personal accounts of discrimination can be found at Secularhumanism.org.[17] For example, many atheists experience harassment. Some public intolerance towards atheism has also been documented on the Atheist Ethicist.[18] For example, Representative Monique Davis condemned atheism during a testimony before the House State Government Administration Committee in Springfield Illinois.

Two ways people think atheism is immoral.

When people think that atheism is immoral, it isn't always clear what that means. There are at least two different things it can mean:

1. It is immoral to disbelieve in God.
2. Atheists are immoral.

It is immoral to disbelieve in God. – To think it is immoral to disbelieve in God can mean the following:

1. Lacking a belief in God is morally wrong.

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15 "Atheism is Ignorance." 26 July 2010. <http://www.dailymorality.com/atheism.html>.
16 "When Faith Justifies Mass Murder." Kreitsauce's Musings. 26 July 2010. <http://kreitsauce.wordpress.com/2009/01/12/atheism-and-mass-murder/>. Originally published January 12, 2009.
17 Downey, Margaret. "Discrimination against Atheists." Secularhumanism.org. 26 July 2010. <http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/downey_24_4.htm>. Originally published May 27, 2004.
18 Fife, Alonzo. "Anti-Atheist Bigotry in 2008." 26 July 2010. <http://atheistethicist.blogspot.com/2009/01/anti-atheist-bigotry-in-2008.html>. Originally published January 14, 2009.

2. Believing that God doesn't exist is morally wrong.

Atheists are immoral – To think that atheists are immoral can mean the following:

1. All atheists are immoral.
2. Atheists tend to be less moral than theists.
3. Atheism causes people to do immoral things.

Arguments that atheism is not immoral.

Why is atheism not immoral? Consider the following:

1. It is morally right to believe whatever is sufficiently justified.
2. Atheists are individuals and shouldn't be judged as a group.
3. We have no reason to think that atheism makes people immoral.

I will discuss each argument in detail:

1. It is morally right to believe whatever is sufficiently justified.

First, it might be true that many atheists have their beliefs for irrational reasons, but that is also true of theists.

Second, if anyone has beliefs for the right reasons, it would be people who study rationality, such as philosophers; and if anyone knows what religious beliefs are most justified, it is also philosophers. The fact is that philosophers have generally not been persuaded by arguments for God's existence. The Philpapers survey found that 72.8% of philosophers "accept or lean towards atheism" and only 14.6% of philosophers "accept or lean towards theism."

No argument for God's existence is infallible. Arguments for God's existence and objections to those arguments are available on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Third, we realize that the best beliefs are the "best justified." To have unjustified beliefs, such as the belief that "torturing people willy nilly is right" is morally wrong, but to have justified beliefs, such as "torturing people willy nilly is wrong" is morally right. The proper function of our reasoning capacity is to produce well justified beliefs.

Fourth, is is not morally right to hold insufficiently justified beliefs. The idea that we should believe in God even if it is insufficiently justified is just as wrong as believing anything else without a good reason. Such insufficiently justified beliefs are dangerous. I discuss this issue in more detail in [Intellectual Virtues, Dogmatism, Fanaticism, and Terrorism](#). I am not suggesting that believing in God can't be sufficiently justified, but there are *theists* who think we can merely have *faith* that God exists.

Fifth, morality doesn't determine what is true. Even if believing that gravity exists made us behave immorally, it would not be immoral to believe that gravity exists because it is obviously true.

Sixth, morality is a matter of choice, but we can't always choose what we believe. We shouldn't try to do things we can't do. If someone can't believe in God, then that person shouldn't believe in God; and not everyone can believe in God.

I can't believe in unicorns even if it made me feel great to have such a belief. I can't help but believe in gravity even when I am falling out of an airplane to my death despite the fact that such a belief would be quite comforting. Many atheists report their belief that God doesn't exist to be like this. They would prefer that God exists because it is an exciting and comforting thought, but they have little choice but to disbelieve.

To conclude, well justified beliefs are morally superior than ones that aren't well reasoned, but many atheists have provided a great deal of justification for their disbelief in God. We have no overriding reason to favor insufficiently justified beliefs over beliefs that are better justified.

2. Atheists are individuals and shouldn't be judged as a group.

It is almost always wrong to judge a person merely on the basis of what group we associate that person with. More men go to prison than women, but that doesn't mean you should dislike men in general. More ethnic minorities go to prison than Caucasians, but that doesn't mean we should dislike ethnic minorities in general. To decide that someone is bad just because of the group they are part of is "prejudiced" because you are illegitimately prejudging what the person is like.

It might be that some groups primarily exist in the name of immorality, such as criminals or the Ku Klux Klan, but this is not the case for atheists.

3. We have no reason to think that atheism makes people immoral.

First, even though more men and minorities go to prison than women and Caucasians, that doesn't mean that being a man or a minority makes you immoral. There can be something else causing men and minorities to become criminals. Some men are good people and some minorities are good people, and it isn't entirely clear why certain groups are being overrepresented in prisons. In the same way there are some good atheists and some criminal atheists and there is no reason to think that atheism itself could make a person immoral.

Second, it might be true that belief in God can help motivate some people to have moral behavior, but that's not true for everyone. Dogmatism and fanaticism are moral faults of some religious groups. Religion has often attempted to legitimize immoral behavior in the name of God, such as the inquisition and Al-Qaeda.

Third, it has been suggested that morality requires God, but atheists can have justified beliefs about moral facts just like everyone else. I discussed the fact that we can *reason about morality* and *justify our beliefs in moral facts* in [Can We Reason About Morality?](#) and such reasoning has nothing to do with God. In fact, most philosophers are (a) atheists and (b) moral realists. That means that most philosophers think that there are moral facts beyond our beliefs and feelings. The [Philpapers survey](#) found that 56.3% of philosophers "accept or lean toward moral realism" and only 27.7% "accept or lean towards anti-realism" despite the fact that only 14.6% identified with theism.

It should be noted that moral anti-realist philosophers attempt to justify the fact that we should *try to be moral*, and *some moral beliefs are better than others* despite the fact that they don't believe morality is grounded in anything other than psychology and anthropology.

Arguments people use to conclude that atheism is immoral.

Many anti-atheists merely assert that atheism is immoral or leads to immoral behavior. I have already argued that such assertions are groundless. Now I will take a look at some actual arguments used by anti-atheists to prove that atheism is immoral:

1. Atheism violates the first commandment.
2. Statistics show atheists to be more immoral than usual.
3. Many evil people were atheists.
4. Atheist totalitarian regimes lead to more deaths than theist dominated cultures.
5. Atheism is motivated by a desire to escape guilt.
6. Atheism is immoral because it's a lie.
7. Atheists are arrogant because they can't know God doesn't exist.
8. Atheists have no reason to be moral.

1. Atheism violates the first commandment.

The first commandment demands that we worship no god other than God. This can be taken to mean that we have to worship God, but we don't need to worship any other God. However, a literal interpretation doesn't imply that. The commandment doesn't actually demand that we worship God.

Additionally, if we take the commandment to demand that we *believe* in God, then the commandment would violate our need to have beliefs based on *reasons* rather than authoritarian demands. I already argued the importance to have beliefs that are sufficiently justified and not all atheists have sufficient justification to believe in God.

There are some other passages of the Bible that might imply that atheism is immoral, and some people think that atheism must be immoral if the Bible says so. This is circular reasoning. No atheist is going to care what the Bible says about morality. You're going to have to prove that the Bible is reliable and that God exists before an atheist will have any reason to care about the Bible.

Finally, if the Bible requires you to believe something unjustified or allow immoral behavior, then that is a reason to doubt the infallibility of the Bible. Christians aren't going to put up with Mulims using the Koran to justify illegitimate beliefs or behavior, and no one else should put up with anyone else using holy books being abused in that way either. If the Bible demands people to allow or endorse immoral forms of prejudice, then that is a reason to reject the infallibility of the Bible rather than a reason to allow or endorse immoral forms of prejudice.

2. Statistics show atheists to be more immoral than usual.

Some people argue that atheists are overrepresented within prison populations or show a tendency to commit various immoral acts. I have already explained why this is in itself not a good argument. The fact that a group has been found to have a statistically significant characteristic does not mean that the group itself is the cause of the

characteristic. For example, more men are criminals than women, but most men are not criminals, and we don't think that being a man causes men to become criminals.

3. Many evil people were atheists.

Some people argue that Hitler, Mao, and Stalin were atheists; but even if that was true, it wouldn't prove that atheism is immoral. There are immoral atheists and there are immoral theists. So what?

4. Atheist totalitarian regimes lead to more deaths than theist dominated cultures.

Some people argue that the totalitarian regimes of Hitler, Mao, and Stalin killed more people than theist dominated cultures. Even if it were true that these regimes were dominated by atheists, it would not prove that atheists are more evil than theists. No causal connection is established.

It wasn't long ago that theists were merely competing with Buddhist (atheistic) countries to see which culture was more moral. That was a much longer time frame to compare atheistic and theistic cultures and the Buddhist cultures didn't seem particularly immoral.

Additionally, European countries tend to be much less religious than the USA, and they aren't having as much problems with criminality. "In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator [within a country] correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion in the prosperous democracies."[19] If religion is so important for morality, then we would expect Europe to have more social problems than the USA.

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19 "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies." Journal of Religion and Society. 26 July 2010. <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>.

5. Atheism is motivated by a desire to escape guilt.

[It has been suggested that atheism is motivated by a desire to escape guilt](#) rather than from *rational justification*, but this is pure speculation and it is certainly not true for everyone. I agree that some people probably believe in atheism from irrational emotional responses, but that can be true for everyone including theists. Additionally, there are at least two reasons to think such a response is false.

One, most people (including most atheists) would prefer that God exists because it is comforting to think that an all powerful and all good being is out to look out for us.

Two, Christianity can be used to escape guilt. Criminals have paid indulgences to clear away their crimes. Some Christians even suggest that immoral acts will all be forgiven for believers. That sounds like a license to be immoral if anything is.

Three, many atheists are very interested in morality and personal responsibility. Almost no atheist thinks that God must exist for morality to exist, and most atheists agree that they should be moral like everyone else. It is possible that guilt isn't necessary for morality, but most atheists agree that they should have a sense of shame and regret.

6. Atheism is immoral because it's a lie.

First, not all atheists claim to know the truth. Some merely say they "don't believe" in God. I don't believe that we can make a spaceship that can take us to far off galaxies, but maybe we can. In the same way some atheists don't believe in God.

Second, some atheists do claim that God doesn't exist, and it is *possible* that such a belief is false. However, a lie is an intentional attempt to deceive. Not all atheists attempt to spread their belief to others, and not all atheists intentionally try to deceive.

Third, if you believe something is true based on sufficient justification, then it is morally right to believe it.

Fourth, atheism is not always *willfully negligent* because even the most educated and informed people who spend a lot of time thinking about religion can come to the conclusion that God doesn't exist.

Fifth, it is not immoral to believe something false as long as your belief is sufficiently justified. Newton's theory of physics was very accurate, but the theory was actually false. Einstein's theory of physics was found to be superior. Still, it was not immoral for Newton to falsely believe in his theory. It would have been absurd to ask people to disbelieve in Newton's theory of physics because his theory was so incredibly justified, and it would be incredibly unjustified to ask people to disbelieve in Einstein's theory of physics for the same reason.

7. Atheists are arrogant because they can't know God doesn't exist.

First, it might be that some atheists are arrogant, but many theists are arrogant as well. Religious arrogance has lead to religious fanaticism and terrorism. The USA does not suffer from atheistic fanaticism and terrorism to the same extent, but I wouldn't be surprised to find out that some atheists are fanatics.

Second, not all atheists claim to know that God doesn't exist.

Third, a person isn't arrogant for believing something. We don't know lots of things but our beliefs can still be sufficiently justified. Newton's belief in his theory of physics was incredibly justified and he was not arrogant for holding such a belief. We don't have to know something for certain for our belief to be morally right and rational. In the same way atheists might have sufficient justification to have their belief.

Fourth, I have already mentioned that most philosophers are atheists. It is incredibly arrogant to tell philosophers who spent their entire lives studying rationality and who have spent a great deal of time studying the arguments for God, and to *tell them that they are arrogant for*

believing something that is based on their expert opinion.

8. Atheists have no reason to be moral.

Some people think that the only reason to be moral is the existence of God. If this is true, then atheists will have no reason to be moral and we might expect them to be less moral. It is true that atheists don't believe in hell, but even many Christians admit that the threat of hell isn't a good reason to be moral. We should be moral because it really is better.

Some people argue that atheists can't possibly believe that being moral "really is better" than being immoral. That for atheists morality is just a social convention, instinctual response, or a result of empathy. This is false. I have already mentioned that most atheistic philosophers are moral realists, and no theory of moral realism I have ever read required us to believe in God. I find moral realism to be a common sense view with no need to speculate about a supernatural realm. This position is discussed in detail in my free ebook, [Does Morality Require God?](#)

Finally, even moral anti-realist philosophers who think that morality is merely a product of our psychology and/or is a human invention tend to think we have some reason to be moral. Social cooperation and solidarity has proved to be quite beneficial and it might be rational even from an egoistic standpoint.

Conclusion

People's discrimination against atheism is incoherent. The fact that atheists are so despised contradicts the fact that Buddhists, Taoists, and other atheistic religions are not so despised. If someone is a Buddhist and an atheist as many atheists are, then are they hated or not? Perhaps atheists who create their own religions are no longer immoral.

Although atheists are despised by about half the population, such an

attitude is misinformed bigotry. It is wrong to judge people based on their nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. We should almost never judge anyone based on the group they are part of, and we have no good reason to do that to atheists. Atheism can be rational when it is based on sufficient justification and some people might have sufficient reason to endorse atheism. Finally, all the arguments that attempt to show that atheism is immoral are unsatisfactory and aren't really reasons against atheism after all.

Chapter 11: Is Homosexuality Immoral?

If we have no reason to think that an action is wrong (a sin), then we have a pretty good reason to think that the action isn't so wrong after all. Taking a shower could be wrong, but we don't have any strong reason to think it could be wrong, so we have good reason to think that taking a shower is okay (morally permissible). People who don't wear their seat belts could potentially cause significant harm to themselves through neglect, but it doesn't seem to be particularly "immoral" overall. If we falsely identify an action as wrong, then we could end up causing guilt, oppression, and animosity towards people who don't deserve it. I will argue that we have no reason to think that homosexuality is wrong. In particular, I will argue that the major philosophical ethical theories would not find it wrong and arguments that people present against homosexuality are not persuasive.

Major Ethical Theories

The major philosophical ethical theories include utilitarianism, the categorical imperative, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and Stoic virtue ethics. I will consider how I understand each of these theories to find homosexuality morally permissible rather than immoral.

1. Utilitarianism

I understand utilitarianism as the following – Utilitarianism states that morality should be guided by the results of an action. If an action maximizes good results (such as happiness) and minimizes bad results (such as pain), then the action is right in the sense that we ought to do it. If an action causes needless suffering, then it would be wrong to do it. If an action would not have any bad results, then the action is not wrong.

Homosexual behavior does not lead to significant harm as far as I can tell. It is true that promiscuous unprotected sex could lead to STD's,

but that is just a fact about promiscuous unprotected sex.

2. Categorical Imperative

The [categorical imperative](#) was originally stated to be, "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." I take this to mean "act only in accordance with reasons that would apply to all similar situations." If you think that it is permissible to take a shower because it is neither disrespectful to others nor does it hurt anyone, then you have to accept that other actions that are neither disrespectful nor hurtful are also permissible, such as tying your shoes.

Homosexual behavior appears to fit this description (it can be respectful and harmless) in at least many cases. Consenting adults can decide to have sex for personal enjoyment without hurting anyone and without being disrespectful whether the sexual act is between people of the same sex or not. If we accept that sexual acts in some situations are permissible, then we have to accept that it will be permissible for the same reason in similar situations.

On the other hand an action such as stealing is disrespectful to people. If I think I am justified to steal a computer because I can make better use of it than someone else, then I will have to accept that other people will be justified to steal it from me for the same reason. It would be hypocritical to think I can steal from people for that reason and other people can't. Fortunately people don't agree that stealing is so easily justified. That doesn't mean that stealing is never justified. It might be that we can agree that life and death situations could justify stealing without being hypocritical.

3. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

I understand [Aristotle](#) as finding personal happiness and flourishing (a life well lived) to be the main goal of ethics, and people who know how to be happy well have a virtuous character. His main interest in ethics will be in terms of virtue and vice. He thinks that certain tendencies of

character that lead to an extreme behavior will not lead to happiness. Courage is to allow fear to moderate our behavior to risk our lives, reputation, comfort, and so on, only when doing so is necessary to have greater happiness. Foolhardiness is it keep fear from moderating our behavior and leads to unnecessary risk taking, and cowardice is to allow fear to moderate our behavior too much.

Aristotle would agree that certain sexual behavior is virtuous and some is not. If homosexuality is a defect in one's character (a detriment to one's happiness), then I would suspect that homosexuals would have more mental illness than others. However, homosexuality in and of itself has not been found to be relevant to mental illness:

> In a review of published studies comparing homosexual and heterosexual samples on psychological tests, Gonsiorek (1982) found that, although some differences have been observed in test results between homosexuals and heterosexuals, both groups consistently score within the normal range. Gonsiorek concluded that "Homosexuality in and of itself is unrelated to psychological disturbance or maladjustment. Homosexuals as a group are not more psychologically disturbed on account of their homosexuality." ([Homosexuality and Mental Health](.).)

4. Stoic Virtue Ethics

The Stoics agreed that our character is relevant to ethics, but they thought that the most important element of our character was our reason and beliefs. Irrational beliefs lead to inappropriate emotions and behavior, and rational beliefs lead to appropriate emotions and character. The Stoics thought that all forms of suffering (such as fear and anger) were caused by irrational value judgments that *something bad has happened*. In the great scheme of things getting you wallet stolen is not a big deal, but stealing a wallet tends to be inappropriate (based on vicious character) because it tends to be caused by greed rather than a rational belief that stealing the wallet is somehow the right thing to do all things considered.

For a Stoic any sexual behavior could be caused by inappropriate beliefs insofar as we think sex is the best thing in the world and allow ourselves to lust after sex irrationally. However, a Stoic admits that pleasure can be a rational goal when we dispassionately realize the limited importance of pleasure. I believe homosexual behavior can be perfectly virtuous in that sense, and perhaps for other reasons as well.

Arguments Against Homosexuality

I have spent some time researching the arguments against homosexuality and I have found the following arguments:

1. Homosexuality is unnatural.
2. Evolution demands that we procreate.
3. Homosexuality leads to health problems.
4. Homosexuality leads to mental health problems.
5. Homosexuality is dangerous to children.
6. Homosexuality could lead to the extinction of the human   race.
7. If homosexuality isn't wrong, then consensual incest isn't wrong.
8. If homosexuality is found acceptable, then more people will become homosexual.
9. If homosexuality is found acceptable, then we will become prejudice against people who think homosexuality is wrong.
10. The Bible/Qur'an is against homosexuality.

Professional philosophers almost all agree that homosexuality is not wrong, and they would not be impressed by these arguments. Some of these arguments have been presented by theologians who seem to be ignorant of actual ethical philosophy and ignorant of actual scientific research.

1. Homosexuality is unnatural.

Some people seem to think that there is an "essence" of what a proper human being should be like as well as what our sexual organs *should* be used for. They believe that sexual organs *should only* be used for

procreation.

First, it isn't clear why being unnatural is wrong. My hands weren't made for walking, so is it wrong for me to walk on my hands? No.

Second, I don't know why sexual organs should only be used for procreation. Perhaps some people think that's why God created sexual organs, but so what?

Third, [homosexuality is found in nature](). It is something that could fulfill a role, such as a homosexual who helps care for children of a family member rather than producing new children. This could give living offspring a better chance at survival rather than produce more offspring that might not have enough resources to live.

Fourth, homosexuality isn't the only form of sexuality that doesn't lead to procreation. If having stimulating sexual organs for pleasure is wrong, then homosexuality is no more wrong than masturbation or the majority of sex everyone is having. It is hypocritical that people get so hyped up against homosexuals and not everyone else also engaging in sexual stimulation for pleasure to an equal degree.

I suspect that most people know that sexual stimulation isn't that bad of a thing, and we can't condemn homosexuals for doing something we know isn't that bad for everyone else.

Fifth, it might be that something is wrong in an unnatural sense if it is unhealthy, but that is a separate issue that I will discuss later.

Sixth, I don't agree that human beings have an "essence." Such an idea was proposed by Aristotle before modern science and philosophers no longer take it to be a tenable position.

Arash Naraghi presented a more in depth objection against the above argument against homosexuality [here]().

2. Evolution demands that we procreate.

[Jason Dulle](), a theologian, argued that homosexuality is wrong from the perspective of evolution because evolution thinks that passing on one's genetic similarity is "the good."

One, this is false. Evolution does not say what is right or wrong, or good or bad. Evolution is just about how the world works.

Second, evolution does not say that procreation is the best way to pass on genetic similarity. It is possible that when limited resources are available that one should not procreate and should instead help protect whatever family members are already alive.

3. Homosexuality leads to health problems.

[Jason Dulle]() argued that homosexuality leads to promiscuity and STDs.

First, It might be true that this is a problem that many homosexuals have, but homosexual behavior in and of itself does not cause the problem. A monogamous homosexual relationship might be a solution. Even so, Dulle is not considering the difference between virtuous and vicious sexual behavior.

To be prejudice against homosexuals for statistical issues, such as higher promiscuity and STD rates, is nothing more than irrational discrimination against an entire group based on what some members of the group do. We might as well decide white people are a bunch of oppressive and greedy business owners, for example.

Second, even if homosexuality in and of itself was reckless similar to how refusing to wear a seat belt is reckless, it is not clear that homosexuality is *immoral*. We don't think of wearing a seat belt as some sort of moral command that people sin against.

Third, we might worry that homosexuals tend to be reckless, mentally

ill, or often engage in criminal behavior, but even if such a link could be established, we could not conclude that homosexuality is wrong in and of itself. If homosexuals are mentally ill or engage in criminal behavior more than other people, then it would still be illegitimately discriminatory to hold that against all homosexuals. Crimes are often linked to men as opposed to women, and minority racial groups as opposed to white people. It is irrational to think that men or racial minority groups are somehow inheritable evil, and it is irrational to think homosexuals are inherently evil or the same reason.

Dulle makes use of statistics to convince us about how reckless homosexuals are, but we can also use statistics to try to justify racism in a similar way. Many criminals are minorities. Consider the following:

General population

The racial composition of the US population as of 2008 was 79.79% White American (65.60% non-Hispanic and 14.19% Hispanic), 12.84% African American (12.22% non-Hispanic and 0.62% Hispanic), 4.45% Asian American (4.35% non-Hispanic and 0.10% Hispanic), 1.01% American Indian or Alaska Native (0.76% non-Hispanic and 0.25% Hispanic), 0.18% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander American (0.14% non-Hispanic and 0.04% Hispanic), and 1.69% Multiracial American (1.64% non-Hispanic and 0.05% Hispanic). 15.25% of the total US population identified their ethnicity as Hispanic.

Prison population

The racial composition of the US prison and jail population as of 2008 was 33.44% White American (non-Hispanic), 40.21% African American (non-Hispanic), 20.29% Hispanic, and 6.06% Other (American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander American, and Multiracial American). (Wikipedia: Race and Crime in the United States.)

The problem with using statistics to try to prove something like homosexuals being reckless by nature is that there are many factors and we aren't really sure what the cause is. We should suspect that race is not the cause of crime and homosexuality is not the cause of recklessness.

4. Homosexuality leads to mental health problems.

Robert A. J. Gagnon, a theologian, argues the following:

> As regards lesbian relationships, the limited studies that we have to date suggest that homosexual females experience on average disproportionately high rates of measurable harm as regards shorter-term sexual relationships and higher instances of mental health problems, relative not only to heterosexual females but even to homosexual males. (Why Homosexual Behavior is More Like Incest and and Polyamory Than Race or Gender)

First, the statistics do not make it clear why homosexuals are mentally ill.

Second, many homosexuals have perfectly good mental health. It could be irrationally discriminatory against all homosexuals to condemn them based on the fact that some of them have mental illness.

Third, the view that homosexuality *leads to mental health problems* is just one more baseless accusation against it. This argument is refuted by a quick internet search, and Gagnon is either conveniently ignorant of what actual mental health research shows or he conveniently decides to keep such information from view. I already mentioned such research in the section on Aristotle that shows that homosexuality does not cause mental illness. There could be some sort of a controversy concerning the effects homosexuality has on mental health, but Gagnon's claims are misleading at worst and uncertain at best. It is true that more homosexuals are attempting suicide than heterosexuals, but

Stress caused from a sexual stigma, manifested as prejudice and discrimination, is a major source of stress for people with a homosexual orientation. Sexual-minority affirming groups and gay peer groups help counteract and buffer minority stress. ([Wikipedia: Homosexuality and Psychology](#))

Fourth, I already mentioned the if homosexuals have mental illness at a high rate, it would not prove that homosexuality is wrong in and of itself.

5. Homosexuality is dangerous to children.

[Jason Dulle](#) argued that homosexuals are dangerous to children because they tend to be child molesters, and other people worry about homosexuals raising children who might raise them wrong. Both of these concerns are misguided

First, it is not clear that homosexuality itself has anything to do with child abuse. Jason Dull misuses statistics once again to try to prove something that is false. A quick internet search would show that homosexuals have not been shown to have a tendency towards child molestation:

> The empirical research does *not* show that gay or bisexual men are any more likely than heterosexual men to molest children. This is not to argue that homosexual and bisexual men never molest children. But there is no scientific basis for asserting that they are more likely than heterosexual men to do so. And, as explained above, many child molesters cannot be characterized as having an adult sexual orientation at all; they are fixated on children. ([Facts about Homosexuality and Child Molestation](#).)

Second, it is not clear that homosexuality has anything to do with raising children poorly. Research has shown homosexuals to be good at raising children. The consensus was that they were equally good, but a new study found the following:

The new study by two University of Southern California sociologists says children with lesbian or gay parents show more empathy for social diversity, are less confined by gender stereotypes, and are probably more likely to explore homosexual activity themselves. Writing in recent issue of the *American Sociological Review*, the authors say that the emotional health of the two sets of children is essentially the same. ([Gay Marriage Does Affect Children Differently, Study Finds](#).)

It is true that children were willing to explore homosexual behavior, but their emotional health was the same, and we so far have no reason to think that homosexual behavior is automatically wrong.

Third, I already mentioned the if homosexuals are criminals at a high rate, it would not prove that homosexuality is wrong in and of itself.

6. Homosexuality could lead to the extinction of the human race.

An anonymous author argued that homosexuality can destroy the entire human race:

> One of the criteria or litmus test of a behavior that is beneficial to humanity at large is, "what if the action that you are promoting is exercised by a majority of the people of the world? Will it advance humanity or will it retard it?" In this case human beings will cease to exist. ([Homosexuality and Islam – An Islamic Perspective.](#))

One, something is not wrong just because it would be bad *if* everyone did it. If everyone was a full time doctor, then our farms would be neglected because civilization requires specialists who each play a different role.

Some people do argue that some behavior is immoral by asking, "What if everyone did that?" but this is a misguided way to reason. ([Some people](#) even seem to think that the categorical imperative is

something like this, but I think it is a clearly mistaken way to understand it.[20]) This kind of question abstracts away all relevant information of the situation. You could ask a doctor performing a surgery and cutting someone open, "What if everyone did that?" Obviously cutting people open is usually wrong and the situation at hand is relevant to our moral reasoning.

I suppose someone could worry that everyone could become homosexuals because it's so exciting and enjoyable, but many people aren't attracted to people of the same sex.

Two, even if everyone was a homosexual, they could still engage in occasional heterosexual sex to continue procreation, or they could use other methods, such as in vitro fertilization.

Three, if being a homosexual is wrong insofar as they are abstinent from procreative behavior, then being celibate is also wrong for the same reason, but that is absurd.

7. If homosexuality isn't wrong, then consensual incest isn't wrong.

There are at least three ways people try to relate homosexuality and consensual incest:

(a) Homosexuality is wrong because God says so, just like consensual incest.
(b) Homosexual sex is wrong because the people involved are too similar, just like consensual incest. It is the similarity between the two people having sex that makes each act wrong.[21]

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20 Gene Veith suggests that the categorical imperative would find that "abortion is wrong because if everyone who could got an abortion, the human race would cease to exist." Kant might mean that we shouldn't do something if it is wrong for everyone else to do it given the exact same situation and moral reasoning, but that is quite a bit different than the issue brought up against homosexuality and abortion. Having an abortion isn't wrong because if everyone did it, then the human race would die out. Kant isn't especially concerned with negative consequences. The reason that abortion is wrong according to the categorical imperative (if it is) is because it can't be justified by moral reason, and abortion will be just as unjustified for others as it is for ourselves.

21 Robert A. J. Gagnon also argues that "if the concept of too much structural sameness becomes irrelevant, then there is no reasonable basis for withholding public recognition of man-mother or adult brother-sister unions. One wonders, in the face of such an assault, how long resistance to adult-adolescent unions and, eventually, adult-child unions can be maintained. Note that I am not saying that

(c) If we agree that homosexual sex is not wrong, the next thing we know people will say that consensual sex is not wrong.

Homosexuality is wrong because God says so, just like consensual incest – I will bring up God later. (See the tenth argument.)

Homosexual sex is wrong because the people involved are too similar, just like consensual incest – I disagree. Consensual incest isn't wrong because the people are too similar. It's wrong because it ruins relationships and destroys families. It is true that homosexuality can also ruin relationships and destroy families, but only to the extent that people condemn homosexual family members. Incest doesn't only ruin families because we condemn incest, but also for other reasons, such a:

(i) People usually can't comfortably spend time with family members who we fear will request sex (or have even requested sex in the past), so it can ruin family relationships, and such relationships are often something that should be improved rather than destroyed.

(ii) We want to know that family members love us for ourselves and not because they want us to give them sexual gratification.

(iii) If consensual incest is ever considered acceptable, then we might fear spending as much alone time with family members because they might want to make an unwanted sexual advance.

(iv) Incest between a parent and child has proven to be less than consensual due to the power differences.

As far as I know consensual incest might not be immoral or destructive in all cases, but it is an incredibly dangerous sort of behavior that has the potential of having destructive effects.

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by approving homosexual unions we may open the door to something worse: polygamy and incest. There are good grounds for arguing that homoerotic unions are worse for society than polygamy and adult consensual incest" (How to Make a Secular Case Against Homosexual Practice).

8. If homosexuality is found acceptable, then more people will become homosexual.

Robert A. J. Gagnon argued the following:

> Cultural endorsement of, and incentives for, homosexual behavior will likely lead to a higher incidence of homosexuality in the population, affecting young people at higher rates. This means that more people will develop a higher risk for the problems discussed in 2 above [promiscuity and STDs]. (How to Make a Valid Case Against Homosexual Practice)

This argument begs the question. Assuming that homosexuality is wrong, then making it acceptable and encouraging such behavior would be wrong. Assuming it is not wrong, then we have no reason to fear more people becoming a homosexual. That said, we don't know that more people will become homosexuals even if homosexuality is found to be acceptable.

9. If homosexuality is found acceptable, then we will become prejudiced against people who think homosexuality is wrong.

Robert A. J. Gagnon presented this argument as the following:

> Caving into the homosexual agenda will lead to the radical marginalization of those who oppose homosexual practice and, ultimately, the criminalization of opposition to homosexual behavior. (How to Make a Valid Case Against Homosexual Practice)

Again, this argument begs the question. Racism is illegal because prejudice against race is wrong. The same could be true about prejudice against homosexuality.

10. The Bible/Quran is against homosexuality.

This argument begs the question. If we assume that the Bible is right about everything, then such an argument could succeed. However, if the Bible falsely says that homosexuality is wrong, then that just proves that the Bible says something false.

Additionally, Arash Naraghi suggested that religious people don't have to condemn homosexuality:

> "Is it possible to be a Muslim and at the same time consistently believe that homosexuality is morally permissible?" I believe the answer is yes. To my understanding, the Quranic verses concerning homosexuality are open to new interpretations. Even if for any reason, one does not find the new upcoming interpretations convincing, another option is still available: she might claim that those verses belong to the shell of the text, i.e., they are not essential to the heart of the Quranic message, and being Muslim requires one's commitment only to the heart of the message, and not to the accidental elements of the holy text. (Islam and Moral Status of Homosexuality)

His answer for Islam could be applied to Jews and Christians as well.

Conclusion

So far I see no reason to think homosexuality is wrong. The four major ethical theories seem to give us reason to think homosexual behavior is permissible as opposed to immoral. I am disappointed with the arguments presented against homosexuality and the great deal of faulty reasoning, misinformation, ignorance, and/or suppressed evidence that many of the arguments require. Most of these arguments were presented by theologians with a PhD, which makes me wonder if theology has strict requirements for qualification.

Chapter 12: Are Muslims Immoral?

Are all Muslims evil, immoral, or satanic? No religion is above criticism, but people have been displaying an irrational disapproval and hatred towards Islam that has lead to prejudice and intolerance towards Muslims. I will discuss the following:

1. An Introduction to Bigotry
2. Evidence of Anti-Islamic Bigotry
3. Myths about Islam

First, I will discuss respect and bigotry. I will argue that we should not highly disapprove of Muslims nor should we be intolerant of them. Second, I will argue that people have been displaying irrational prejudice and intolerance towards Muslims. Third, I will argue that Muslims are not particularly dangerous or irrational as many people seem to think.

An Introduction to Bigotry

Bigotry is irrational beliefs and actions against a group of people. Moderate bigotry is merely disapproval of a group—or unwarranted negative beliefs about a group. Extreme bigotry is when horrific violence or oppression is taken against people of a group due to hatred or fear of that group.

Rather than being bigoted we should accord appropriate levels of respect. Disagreement, disapproval, and tolerance are three major categories of respect:

1. **Disagreement with a group** – It is always appropriate to criticize a group for having irrational beliefs or inappropriate behavior. It is perfectly respectful of a person to disagree with them, even though we might not say we fully "respect" beliefs we disagree with). Islam could very well require people to have irrational beliefs that encourage inappropriate behavior. Islam is not above

criticism.

2. **Rational disapproval towards a group** – Some groups deserve more approval than others. Islam deserves some amount of approval, but many people have an inappropriately disprove of it based on prejudice and over-generalizations.

3. **Rational tolerance of a group** – We should be tolerant of people and their right to have false beliefs even when those beliefs can be dangerous. It would be oppressive to use force to try to make people believe what you want.

I will discuss each of these levels of respect in more detail.

Disagreement with a group.

To criticize a group of people is not necessarily bigotry or prejudice. The Ku Klux Klan and terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, have many irrational intolerant beliefs that we should criticize. Many religions also have irrational beliefs and criticizing such beliefs is perfectly respectful. We can hope to use arguments to persuade other people to accept the truth because we assume that they are rational enough to be reasonable and learn from their mistakes.

We should not agree with dangerous irrational beliefs, such as those held by the KKK or Al-Qaeda. That means that we should criticize such beliefs by the use of reason and argumentation. It doesn't mean that we should use violence against people within these groups (unless done in self-defense).

We can disagree with religions and groups without being disrespectful of the human beings within these groups. Even criminals deserve some degree of respect and certain rights—such as the right to freedom of speech or the right to marry.

Rational disapproval towards a group.

To disapprove of the Ku Klux Klan and Al-Qaeda is not irrational. Perhaps we should even *despise* these groups. However, to disapprove

of all black people is irrational because there is no reason to think all black people are dangerous or immoral. Some black people are good and others are not. Being black does not make someone evil.

Many people despise Islam and *all Muslims,* which is irrational bigotry. Islam does not deserve such strong levels of disapproval. Some Muslims are good people even though not all Muslims are good people. Islam might have its faults, but it is not usually as dangerous as the Ku Klux Klan or Al-Qaeda.

In reality Islam *in general* seems to deserve neither strong approval nor disapproval because it has not been scientifically proven to be highly beneficial nor dangerous. Muslims are individuals who can be good or bad, so they shouldn't be despised based merely on the fact that they are Muslims. Of course, there are fanatical groups of Islam, such as Al-Qaeda, that have been proven to be dangerous enough to warrant strong disapproval. This is no different than Christianity—[The Christian Identity Movement](#) is a fanatical Christian group that deserves disapproval.

Rational tolerance of a group.

We should not be tolerant of violence. We might have to use force to suppress violence. We should also be intolerant of irrational oppression or violence. If people want to make homosexuality, atheism, or Islam illegal, we might have to take action and use political pressure to stop it. There are religious people who are intolerant of other religions, homosexuals, and atheists; but we can't allow these religions to oppress or harm these people.

Should we be tolerant of irrational disapproval? Yes. We have to protect people's rights to have their own beliefs no matter how horrific. That doesn't mean that we have to approve of irrational disapproval (such as racism). We can despise the Ku Klux Klan's beliefs and argue against them. We can't force people to be rational, but we can try to help them be more rational by the use of argumentation and education.

We should be tolerant of people who have harmful beliefs because it is wrong to try to make people believe what you want. The Ku Klux Klan is legal even though the beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan are irrational and dangerous. Of course, there are limits to free speech. Members of the Ku Klux Klan can't request or advise the use of violence against the people they hate. It is legal to have harmful beliefs, but it isn't legal to request or advise illegal behavior.[22]

Evidence of Anti-Islamic Bigotry

I will discuss three sources of evidence of anti-Islamic bigotry. One, statistics. Two, bigoted speech. Three, hate crimes.

Statistics

First, a Newsweek poll from 2007 found that 45% of Americans would not vote for a *qualified* Muslim for a political position.[23] Second, a study published in 2003 from the University of Minnesota found that 33.5% of Americans would disapprove if their child wanted to marry a Muslim.[24]

Bigoted Speech

First, there has been a lot of anti-Islamic statements made in the media, in books, and on websites.

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22 "First Amendment." Cornell University. 3 September 2010.
    <http://topics.law.cornell.edu/wex/First_amendment>. Originally published August 19, 2010.
23 Braiker, Brian. "Poll: Americans are Mixed on U.S. Muslims." MSNBC.com. 1 September 2010.
    <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19874703/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098/>. Originally published July 20, 2007.
24 Cline, Austin. "University of Minnesota Study on American Attitudes Towards Atheists & Atheism." About.com. 1 September 2010.
    <http://atheism.about.com/od/atheistbigotryprejudice/a/AtheitsHated.htm>.

Some books against Islam include the following:

1. Islam: Evil in the Name of God (2009), which supposedly tells us "[w]hy the slaughter of 2,973 on 9/11 meant no more to Muslims then stepping on 2,973 ants."
2. Religion of Peace?: Islam's War Against the World (2006), which supposedly reveals Islam to be a totalitarian force that wants to conquer the world.
3. Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam (2007), which supposedly proves that Christianity embraces reason and Islam rejects it.

Websites against Islam include the following:

1. Ten Myths About Islam Exposing Lies, which supposedly proves that Islam is inherently intolerant and violent.
2. Ban Islam Petition asks us to make Islam illegal.
3. Islam Exposed, which asserts that Islam is based on pagan moon worship.

Second, the "ground zero" mosque is being used to rouse hatred to gain votes. Consider this television advertisement for a republican candidate who suggests that the mosques are trophies erected by our terrorist enemies to celebrate their victories against America. The fact that people don't want a mosque near ground zero has less to do with being offensive and more to do with the fact that mosques are associated with terrorists. People are now protesting mosques all over America. "At a July rally near Nashville, angry protestors spoke against a proposed 15-acre site that some fear could be turned into a militant training ground. The mosque leader says he's been there for 12 years and congregants are just enlarging their religious facility."[25]

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25 Shawn, Eric. "Opposition Growing to New Mosques." Liveshots. 1 September 2010. <http://liveshots.blogs.foxnews.com/2010/08/09/opposition-growing-to-new-mosques/>. Originally published August 9, 2010.

Hate Crimes

There have been quite a few hate crimes against Muslims. "Recently, a [Muslim cab driver in New York was stabbed](#) and another man entered a mosque and [accused the worshipers of being terrorists and then urinated on prayer rugs](#). And over the weekend there was an [arson attack against an Islamic community center building site](#) in a Nashville suburb."[26]

Myths about Islam

I will discuss some common myths about Islam that is often used as propaganda against Muslims and such beliefs often cause irrational disapproval of them. Anyone who realizes that racism is wrong will have to admit that there are irrational forms of prejudice. We shouldn't despise or highly disapprove a person merely because he or she is part of a group unless we have very good reason for doing so. To highly disapprove of all Muslims is wrong just like prejudice against all women, [atheists](#), [homosexuals](#), or Christians.

I will discuss the following three myths about Islam:

1. Islam is the Qur'an.
2. The Qur'an isn't open to interpretation.
3. There are no moderate Muslims.

Islam is the Qur'an.

Many people think that Muslims must believe that the Qur'an is infallible, so and if a single passage found in the Qur'an is false, then the entire Islamic faith is disproven. It might be true that many Muslims believe that the Qur'an is infallible, but finding a single error in the book would not disprove the entire religion.

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26 Bouarrouj, Khelil. "Republican Leaders Responsible for Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes?" 1 September 2010. <http://www.examiner.com/rnc-in-washington-dc/republican-leaders-responsible-for-anti-muslim-hate-crimes>. Originally published August 30, 2010.

Many people find quotations within the Qur'an to prove the religion to be intolerant or to advocate violence. Consider how Andew McCarthy argues that there are no moderate Muslims:

> As Islam is a comprehensive system of worship (Ibadah) and legislation (Shari'ah), the acceptance of secularism means abandonment of Shari'ah, a denial of the divine guidance and a rejection of Allah's injunctions. It is indeed a false claim that Shari'ah is not proper to the requirements of the present age. The acceptance of a legislation formulated by humans means a preference of the humans' limited knowledge and experiences to the divine guidance: "Say! Do you know better than Allah?" (Qur'an, 2:140) For this reason, the call for secularism among Muslims is atheism and a rejection of Islam. Its acceptance as a basis for rule in place of Shari'ah is downright apostasy.[27]

McCarthy's argument is little more than a single quote from the Qur'an that says that we don't know better than Allah, and the actual existence of actual moderate Muslims seems to disprove his argument in two seconds.

Islam is not the Qur'an for the following reasons:

One, disproving a single passage in the Qur'an would not disprove the entire book. Theoretically, the Qur'an could have a single error in it and everything else could be true. If that was the case, we would have a good reason to be Muslims.

Two, a single well-established error found within the Qur'an would not persuade Muslims to give up the Islamic faith. They would merely have to admit that the Qur'an wasn't infallible after all.

Three, to know what Muslims believe, we should study actual Muslims. We can't rely on some arbitrary definition, such as, "All Muslims must believe that the Qur'an is infallible." A scientific study

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27 McCarthy, Andrew. "Inventing Moderate Islam." National Review Online. 3 September 2010. <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/244545/inventing-moderate-islam-andrew-c-mccarthy?page=1>. Originally published August 24, 2010.

would have to show that all Muslims actually believe that the Qur'an is infallible, but just the opposite has been proven. Arash Naraghi, who has PhD in philosophy (and a specialization in religious philosophy) asserts that "being Muslim requires one's commitment only to the heart of the message, and not to the accidental elements of the holy text."[28]

Some people would argue that the fact that not all "Muslims" believe the Qur'an is infallible merely requires us to reject that such people should be called "Muslims." However, it is possible that very few people believe that the Qur'an is infallible and it would be absurd to say that only the most fanatical or dogmatic "Muslims" are *real* Muslims.

The Qur'an isn't open to interpretation.

Even if Muslims must believe that the Qur'an is infallible, it is possible for them the interpret the Qur'an in a way that does not advocate violence, intolerance, or require excessively irrational beliefs. Interpreting the Qur'an is an important part of Islamic Tradition called *Tafsir*. However, an extremely popular youtube video, Three Things About Islam, attempts to prove that Islam is not open to interpretation.

Again, to know what Muslims actually believe what what beliefs Islam requires, we should take a look at actual Muslims rather than arbitrarily define Muslims in various ways. Actual Muslims encourage scholarly interpretations of the Qur'an. Consider how Arash Naraghi argues that Islam does not require disapproval of homosexuality. "'Is it possible to be a Muslim and at the same time consistently believe that homosexuality is morally permissible?' I believe the answer is yes. To my understanding, the Quranic verses concerning homosexuality are open to new interpretations" (ibid.).

Interpretations of the Qur'an require us to know when the Qur'an is

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28 Naraghi, Arash. "Islam and the Moral Status of Homosexuality." 3 September 2010.
    <http://www.arashnaraghi.org/articles/Islamandminorities.htm>. Originally published December 7th, 2005.

metaphorical or has a specific context that must be understood.

A general rule about religion is that the passages of the holy books often require proper interpretation or they must be rejected. It is often irrational to accept a hasty and literal interpretation of certain passages. This issue was discussed at some length in my post [Intellectual Virtues, Dogmatism, Fanaticism, & Terrorism](#).

There are no moderate Muslims.

Accusations that there are no moderate Muslims range from beliefs that "all Muslims are terrorists" to "all Muslims are intolerant of other religions" to "all Muslims disapprove of homosexuality." Again, these accusations are easily disproven by studying actual Muslims.

First, consider a Gallup Poll conducted from 2001 to 2007 has revealed that "About 93 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims are moderates and only seven percent are politically radical, according to the poll, based on more than 50,000 interviews... [T]he study, which Gallup says surveyed a sample equivalent to 90 percent of the world's Muslims, showed that widespread religiosity 'does not translate into widespread support for terrorism,' said Mogadeh, director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies."[29]

Second, consider that "a 2007 survey titled Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream, the Pew Research Center found Muslim Americans to be largely integrated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world."[30]

Third, consider that not all Muslims disapprove of homosexuality. The Al-Fatiha Foundation, "which advances the cause of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims" that "accepts and considers homosexuality as natural, either regarding Qur'anic verses as obsolete in the context

29 "Major Survey Challenges Western Perceptions of Islam." 3 September 2010. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5i5ajtNJ0qTTRMBSFpYngMOjrmDbQ>. Originally published February 27, 2008.
30 "Islam in the United States." Wikipedia.org. 3 September 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_the_United_States>.

of modern society, or pointing out that the Qu'ran speaks out against homosexual lust, and is silent on homosexual love."[31]

Conclusion

Although we must be tolerant of irrational prejudice and disapproval, such prejudice and disapproval is dangerous and is often used to promote intolerance, so we should use arguments to reason and enlighten people. People who are prejudiced against Asians might think it is justified to harm Asians, people who are prejudice against homosexuals often want to make it illegal for homosexuals to get married, and and many people who are prejudice against Muslims want the government to stop the construction of mosques.

The hatred, fear, prejudice, extreme disapproval, and intolerance towards Muslims is irrational. Such attitudes reflect over-generalizations—the belief that all Muslims must be like the worst sort of Muslims. Moreover, actual scientific studies and actual Muslims are the best way to learn about Islam rather than relying on arbitrary definitions and quotes of the Qur'an.

Finally, there are religious groups within Islam (and Christianity) that do have dangerous beliefs and deserve disapproval. I oppose irrational intolerance wherever it comes from.

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31 "LGBT Topics and Islam." Wikipedia.org. 3 September 2010.
    <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_topics_and_Islam>.

Chapter 13: Is Fantasy, Such as Dungeons & Dragons or Harry Potter, Immoral?

Fantasy entertainment has been highly criticized from religious organizations. Dungeons and Dragons, Magic: the Gathering, Harry Potter, and PokéMon have been cause for concern to those who worry it could be a gateway to the occult or be used to cause illegitimate tolerance towards the occult. Such worries reveal little other than the fact that many people are irrational (and have lost their grasp of reality). The suspicion towards fantasy entertainment has revealed intolerance towards other religions and worse—a serious belief in black magic. First, I will suggest that many people really do despise fantasy and believe it is immoral. Second, I will present some reasons that people are against fantasy and reply to those worries.

I have already written about paranoia towards Magic: the Gathering in particular in my discussion, [Magic: the Gathering is the Devil!](), but I will now take a look at the paranoia concerning fantasy in general, including worries about Harry Potter and Dungeons and Dragons.

Are people against fantasy?

Yes, many people believe that fantasy is a corrupting influence. There are many parents especially worried about censoring what their children see or do. Even college students were outraged when advertising for Magic: the Gathering was presented in a student newspaper at Spring Arbor University, Michigan.[32] One student said, "I think it is kind of questionable, because if we are a Christian college, we should not be advocating things that do not honor God" (ibid.).

There are not only several religious websites that present arguments

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32 Skarritt, Kelly. "Magic ad causes campus controversy." The Crusader. 12 August 2010. <http://media.www.crusaderonline.com/media/storage/paper990/news/2000/11/21/UndefinedSection/Magic.Ad.Causes.Campus.Controversy-2470660.shtml>. Published November, 21, 2000.

against fantasy, but books have been written that condemn fantasy, such as:

- <u>Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons</u> by Peter Leithart (1988)
- <u>Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth</u> by Larson Bob Larson (1989)
- <u>What's a Christian to Do with Harry Potter?</u> by Connie Neal (2001)
- <u>Pokemon & Harry Potter: A Fatal Attraction</u> by Phil Arms (Author) (2001)
- <u>Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick</u> by Richard Abanes (2008)

The hysteria concerning Dungeons and Dragons in the 1980's was particularly prevalent and it was presented as a movie, Mazes and Monsters (1982) starring Tom Hanks, and the hysteria was parodied in the Deadale Wives skit "Dungeons and Dragons." An entertaining review of Mazes and Monsters was done by Spoony and can be found <u>here</u>. The Deadale Wives skit was made into a youtube video <u>here</u>.

Why are people against fantasy?

There are many reasons that Christians take offense at fantasy, such as:

1. It causes tolerance to the occult.
2. It is used to recruit impressionable youth into the occult.
3. It leads to confusion over fantasy and reality.
4. Strict adherence to the Bible.
5. Fantasy can become an "idol."

What do these concerns mean and why are the baseless? Let's consider each concern.

1. It causes tolerance to the occult.

What exactly is the occult? The technical meaning means "hidden knowledge" but many Christians like to use the word in their own way to make the word sound more threatening by equating it with the use of magic and devil worshiping.

The occult is basically equated with any supposedly paranormal religious practice other than Christianity itself. Note that miracles are taken to be "holy" by Christians:

1. The Eucharist (eating of Jesus's flesh and blood from crackers and wine) is taken to be quite miraculous by the Catholic church. They really do tell us that wine turns into blood, and bread turns into flesh.
2. Saints performed miracles.
3. Priests perform exorcisms.

Paranormal events are said to be "miracles" when they are taken to be good by "Christians" but any miraculous paranormal events accorded to people of other regions are often taken to be "magic."

Many people think that fantasy can make the occult (e.g. magic) to seem friendly. However, the main problem with claiming that fantasy can cause tolerance with the occult is that it assumes that religious tolerance is a bad thing. Why not be tolerant of other religions? Buddhists, Taoists, polytheists, etc. have not failed to be productive members of society. Magic insofar as it is little more than non-Christian paranormal explanations is no more corrupting than the belief in miracles. The belief in miracles and magic do seem to encourage superstition and irrationality to some extent, but people can be productive members of society with religions that involve magic or miracles.

2. It is used to recruit impressionable youth into the occult.

The view that the occult wants to recruit people either means (a) non-Christian religions want more people to join or (b) Satan worshipers want to have more people join their cause to take over the world.

First, this "problem" with fantasy reveals intolerance towards other religions, which I have already argued against.

Second, people really do believe that devil worshipers want to take over the world. This is supposedly a large conspiracy. A book was written to debunk such an absurd hysterical worry, In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult by Robert D. Hicks (1991). I haven't read the book, so I don't know how well written it is, but the idea that magic-wielding devil worshipers exist is pretty silly.

According to Vida Earnshaw, who researched the hysterical thoughts of other Christians,

> Role-playing games simulate real occult teachings, rituals, and practices. Players are just a step away from doing it for real. A former Occultist said that Occult leaders attend gaming tournaments to scout out skilled players and entice them to "do it for real." He said that when he did this, none of the players ever said "No."[33]

Earnshaw's research is supported by "Ask Peter," a question and answer website, where "Peter" claims,

> I did for real what Magic the Gathering does in virtual land. I know what happens for real when a victor quenches an opponent - he takes on the energy of the one who is defeated. In my response to Magic the Gathering I just KNOW that in the game life can be restored - in reality that does not happen. When kids make the transition from the game to the reality there is a rude awakening ahead. Just like in the flight simulator if you crash the

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33 Earnshaw, Vida. "Dabbling in the Occult." Thankful Place. 12 August 2010. <http://thankfulplace.wordpress.com/2007/10/23/dabbling-in-the-occult/>. Published October, 23, 2007.

plane you still get to walk out of the simulator. In reality if you crash a plane you die.[34]

The idea is that there are spell casting Satan worshipers teaching games like Magic: the Gathering to recruit people to join and become real wizards is beyond absurdity and reveals little more than the fact that some Christians can no longer tell the difference between reality and fantasy. Magic is not real.

For the sake of a charitable reading, I suppose it is possible that a small band of lunatics believe that they are real wizards. However, real wizards are not something we can rationally believe in.

First, the "evidence" given for "real magic" is testimonial and "hearsay." Testimonial evidence is also known as "anecdotal evidence," which is a popular fallacy (error in reasoning). Testimonial evidence does not prove much of anything.

Second, we have no reason to actually believe magic is real.

Third, if magic was real, then the following would probably be true:

1. Scientists would have much more evidence to support its existence.
2. Wizards wouldn't hide the fact that they have real magic because everyone would want to learn about it and join their "religion." People would spend thousands to millions of dollars to learn it if necessary.
3. If Satan were the source of power of wizards, then he wouldn't want to hide the fact that wizards exist. He wouldn't be choosey. He would be happy to have a very large following, and getting such a following would be quite easy.
4. No one would need to use a game to teach people how exciting magic is. They would love to become wizards as it is. To have games to "entice" children into learning "real magic" would be like needing movies to "entice" men to want to eat doughnuts.

34 "Owls, familiar spirits and occult simulations." Ask Peter. 12 August 2010.
   <http://www.crossroad.to/ask-peter/q-a.htm#owls>.

No propaganda campaign is needed to teach men to want to have doughnuts and no campaign is needed to teach children to want to learn to cast spells.

None of this is true, according those against fantasy. They want us to believe that no one knows about wizards and that teaching games is necessary to "entice" people to want to know real magic. That is simply absurd.

3. It leads to confusion over fantasy and reality.

Is fantasy going to teach our children the wrong lessons in life? Possibly, but it's not always meant to teach the right lessons. Fantasy tends not to be education. That's up to parents.

Is fantasy going to teach our children that magic is real? I don't see any reason to think that it will.

However, a delusional person who doesn't know the difference between fantasy and reality might have a negative reaction to fantasy. It might be a good idea to keep Harry Potter away from dangerously mentally ill people.

4. Strict adherence to the Bible.

Earnshaw asks us to consider the following Bible quotes:

Exodus 22:18 "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

Leviticus 19:26,31 "Thou shalt not eat anything with the blood: neither shall ye use enchantment, nor observe times. Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God."

Leviticus 20:27 "A man also or a woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them."

First, taken literally these passages seem completely irrational. Magic is not real and killing wizards is not a good idea. Consider the fanatical history involving witch hunts. Do we really want to say that the witch hunts were legitimate use of violence? Should we look for all the Wiccans and send them to a gas chamber? Obviously not. When we are presented with an apparently irrational quotation from the Bible, we have three options:

1. We can accept the quote literally and decide to be irrational.
2. We can interpret the quote to be assured that it isn't taken in an irrational way. I'm not sure how to do this with the above quotes.
3. We can reject the quotes entirely. We can claim that the quotes were not divinely inspired, for example.

To accept the quotes requires us to irrationally accept the existence of magic and irrationally legitimize violence against wizards. To irrationally legitimize violence is [fanatical](#) and can lead to terrorist and criminal acts, such as the attacks on the world trade center.

Imagine that someone of another religion had a holy book that said that Christians are evil and should be destroyed. Would you think they should blindly agree with their Bible or should they reject irrational passages found in their holy book?

Second, the Bible is not in and of itself a good reason to believe something. If a math book seems to have all the right answers, you should still reject the one falsehood it contains, such as "1+1=3." Each statement in the Bible must be assessed individually and actual argumentation is required before demanding anyone believes it.

I suppose we might trust plausible math statements of a very accurate math book that we can't solve yet, but we definitely wouldn't trust implausible and irrational ones.

Third, the quotes above, even if true, would not give us reason to

condemn fantasy. Even games that ask people to "pretend to be wizards" are no worse than to have a child play an evil witch in a Wizard of Oz play. Pretending to be evil during play is pretty normal and has not been shown to corrupt people.

5. Fantasy can become an "idol."

There is a belief that we should spend every waking moment worshiping God and any other strong interest is like worshiping a false god (an idol). For example, one Christian warns against allowing a child to play Magic: the Gathering because "if you did purchase it for your son, he will probably enjoy it so much that he will make it a little hobby or in other words, it will become his 'Idol', and will want to purchase other things to go with his game such as dragon statues for his room, perhaps a wizard bed quilt cover, then a crystal ball."[35]

First, if "idol worship" includes any distraction that keeps people from worshiping God, then just about any interest we have is an idol— marriage, caring for children, playing sports, watching television, shopping, doing philosophy, conducting science experiments, educating ourselves, and so on. I am against irrational obsessions that prevent people from living a full and flourishing life, but "small hobbies" have never been shown to be irrational obsessions.

Additionally, the "idol worship" problem taken to be spending time away from praying and worshiping God is absurd.

Finally, even if spending time away from worshiping God was wrong, spending time with fantasy seems no more wrong than completely healthy and normal activities, such as raising children or educating ourselves.

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35 Lordsgirl777. "Is the card game Magic: The Gathering harmful to Christian teens or are we overreacting?" Get Christian Answers. 12 August 2010. <http://www.getchristiananswers.com/answers/card-game-magic-gathering-harmful-christian-teens-or-are-we-overreacting>. Published August, 29, 2009.

Conclusion

There is no reason to despise or fear fantasy. Some fantasy is more appropriate for children than others, but many of the Harry Potter books probably won't hurt any sane children.

Some of the arguments and worries about fantasy are completely out of this world. The worry that devil worshipers and real wizards are recruiting children for the sake of evil is beyond delusional.

Conclusion

People have a fairly good intuitive understanding of morality, but it is flawed. These flaws often lead to poor reasoning and neglect of one's own moral life. Without moral philosophy we are more likely to be criminals, reckless drivers, to irrationally disapprove of homosexuals, oppress misunderstood minorities, and so on. We can decide to improve ourselves and become more moral. To make such a decision is greatly aided by reading moral philosophy and learning to think like a moral philosopher. We can't do the right thing because it's the right thing unless we know right from wrong.