

# Metaethics

# Ethics and Metaethics

**Normative ethics:** the study of goodness, virtue, and right action.

- What is intrinsically good?
- What is the best distribution of benefits and burdens in the world?
- What traits of character do we value in people?
- What rules or principles should we follow?

**Metaethics:** the study of these moral concepts and their grounding.

- What is the scope and status of moral values?
- What does it mean to say that “X is good”?
- Do moral claims like “X is good” have a truth-value?
- Do moral values exist in the world independently of human beings?

# Subjectivism and Objectivism

**Ethical Subjectivism:** the truth of moral judgments is grounded in **an arbitrary will**.

- Simple Ethical Subjectivism (SES): the individual's feelings.
- Divine Command Theory (DCT): the will of God.
- Ethical Relativism (ER): the beliefs of the group.

**Arbitrary** =<sub>df.</sub> based on random choice or personal whim, rather than any reason or system: *his mealtimes were entirely arbitrary.*

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**Ethical Objectivism:** the truth of moral judgments is grounded in **some non-arbitrary reality**.

- Aristotle's virtue theory: human flourishing.
- John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism: pleasure.
- Immanuel Kant's deontology: reason.

# Simple Ethical Subjectivism (1/4)

“Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact which you call **vice**. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thought. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the **object**. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation.”

— David Hume  
*Treatise*, Bk. 3, pt. 1, §1 (1739-40).



David Hume  
(1711-1776)

## Favoring Subjectivism (2/4)

**What is SES?** The truth of moral judgments is grounded in ...  
... the speaker's feelings.

### Reasons favoring SES:

- (1) Fits with the common sense view of the world that distinguishes **facts** (“the land of **is**”) from **values** (“the land of **ought**”).
- (2) Explains the **lack of moral agreement** between individuals.

# Opposing Subjectivism (3/4)

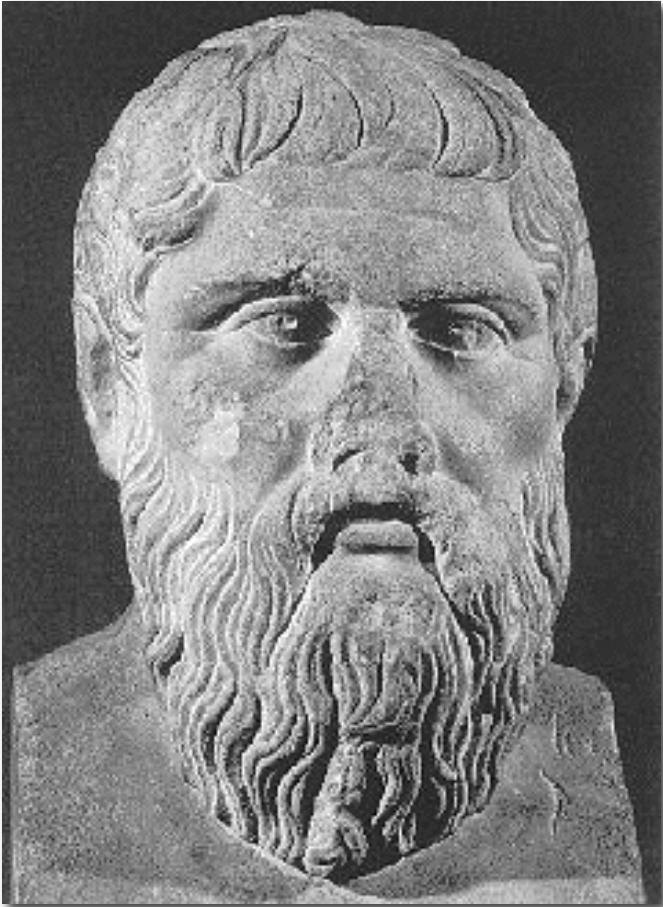
- (1) Implies **moral incorrigibility**  
(leaves no room for uncertainty and deliberation)
- (2) Misplaces the **location** of moral disagreement (and trivializes it to one of “taste”)
- (3) **Too inclusive** (includes aesthetic judgment)

## Is and Ought (4/4)

- (1) A batter **is** standing at the plate.
- (2) That fan **shouldn't** curse the pitcher; it isn't kind.  
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- (3) The batter struck out. He **should** return to the dugout.
- (4) You **should** tell the truth; society will not function well if people always lie.  
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- (5) We **should not** act in ways that undermine the game of baseball.
- (6) We **should not** act in ways that undermine our social existence.



# Divine Command Theory (1/4)



Plato  
(427-347 BCE)

“The point that I would first like to understand is whether the pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, or whether it is pious because it is loved by the gods.”

Plato, *Euthyphro* (10a)

# Divine Command Theory (2/4)

**What is DCT?** The truth of moral judgments is grounded in ...  
... the will of God.

Reasons favoring Divine Command Theory:

- (1) DCT **allows for moral disagreement** and provides methods for resolving that disagreement.
- (2) DCT **allows for moral guidance and advice.**

# Against DCT (3/4)

- (1) Moral truths remain wholly **arbitrary**
- (2) God's goodness becomes **vacuous**
- (3) How do we **discern** God's will? (the problem of special revelation)

# Leibniz against the DCT (4/4)



Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz  
(1646-1716)

## (1) From Scripture

God would not have to regard his creation afterwards to see that it was good.

## (2) From God's Praiseworthiness

Why praise God for what he has done, if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary?

## (3) From God's Rationality

Every act of willing supposes some reason for the willing, so God must have been following some principle in his willing a command.

# Ethical Relativism (1/6)



William Graham Sumner  
(1840-1910)

“The *right* way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right.”

— W. G. Sumner  
*Folkways* (1906), p. 28.

## For Relativism (2/6)

**What is ER?** The truth of moral judgments is grounded in ...  
... the moral beliefs of a culture.

### Favoring Ethical Relativism:

Ethical relativism explains the prevalence of **cultural relativism** (the difference in moral beliefs from culture to culture).

## Ethical vs Cultural (3/6)

Ethical Relativism: what is *actually* right differs between cultures.

Cultural Relativism: what is *believed to be* right differs between cultures.

# Relativism vs Universalism (4/6)

**Ethical Relativism:** what is ethically right **differs** between cultures.

**Ethical Universalism:** what is ethically right **is the same** at all times and places.



# Against Ethical Relativism (5/6)

- (1) **Corrigibility** does not imply relativity.
- (2) It makes moral **criticism** impossible.
- (3) It makes moral **progress** or **reform** incoherent.
- (4) Ambiguity of **cultural boundaries**.
- (5) It ignores apparent moral **universals**.

# Moral Universals (6/6)

“Significant ethical principles carry weight in virtually every human community. These include: **obligations on members of a family to support their kin**; **obligations of reciprocity**, to return favors done and gifts received; and **constraints on sexual relationships**.... The precise form of the obligations or constraints varies from one society to another, but the significance of these universals lies in the fact that obligations of kinship, reciprocity, and sexual relationships form the core of all human ethical systems — and they also guide the behavior of our close non-human relatives.”

— Peter Singer

*Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 57