

Moral Philosophy aka Theories of Ethics: the foundations of “good” and “bad”, and the foundation of economic policy?

[Edward Morey](#) – draft: February 2, 2010

As a moral philosophy, is economics bad or baaad?

Assume *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* fired Randy Cohen, their ethics columnist, and is considering replacing him with an economist, maybe even an environmental economist.

You have applied for the job, and must now take the following true-false ethics quiz to see if you really are an economist. Answer each question true or false.

1. Shifting highly-polluting industries to developing countries is bad.
2. Killing and barbequing the last flying DooWap bird might be the right thing to do.
3. We must do whatever it takes to reduce pollution.
4. Fairness is in the eye of the beholder.
5. The process is as important as the outcome.
6. It is sometimes good to kill a crying baby.
7. The optimal number of ax murders is zero.
8. It’s great that poor people have the option of working in highly toxic environments.
9. Selling permits to do bad things is always a bad idea.
10. Clean air is more important to the rich than to the poor.

Most economists would prefer to answer “it depends” to each question.

But, if forced to choose between true and false, many would answer false to the odd-numbered questions and true to the even-numbered questions.

Do you have the ethics of an economist?

Put simply, economists think an act is good if the benefits of doing it are greater than the costs, and evil, if the reverse is true.

From an economic perspective, the Jewish father who suffocates his crying baby to save the family from being discovered by the Nazis is on solid moral ground.

But, then again, so is the guy who barbecues the DooWap to extinction as long as the enjoyment of the DooWap last supper exceeds the costs.

All this obviously begs the question of the benefits and costs to whom, and the question of how one measures those benefits and costs.

Numerous old guys, including a few economists, have spent considerable time over thousand years considering how one might distinguish between “good” and “bad”

One could simply make two lists: the “list” of “good acts” and the “list of bad acts”.

The list would be hard to defend, and, besides, the list would be very long.¹ Others might say, “There is no basis for what you put on each list other than your arbitrary whims. And, your whims ain’t better than my whims.”

To defend your list of goods and bads against such cruel criticism, you would need to come up with a list of assumptions/justifications that together would determine those actions and outcomes that are good and those that are bad.

Then, if your audience buys your assumptions, they have to accept good and bad as implied by those assumptions.

So, that is what you do. You build a theory. You list a bunch of assumptions that you feel capture the underlying principles of good and bad, and then logically determine from that set of assumptions (hopefully all consistent with one another) whether a particular action or outcome is good or bad.²

We need to study some of the main theories for distinguishing between goodness and badness. But why?

As economists, and environmental economists, we need to understand and question how economists judge good from bad, that economics has an ethic, what that ethic is, and its foundations.

And, we need to understand there are alternative foundations for ethics.

Note that it is possible to be an economist without having the ethics of an economist. As I noted before, economics is two things: (1) the development of models to explain the allocation of resources and the distribution of goods, including how the allocation and distribution will change if things exogenous to the models change (e.g. government policy), and (2) investigations and conclusions as to whether one allocation and distribution is better or worse than another.

The former is typically called *positive economics* because it is devoid of judgments, the latter called *normative economics* or *welfare economics*. If you restrict your economics to the former, there is no ethics involved, but then you can’t make recommendations about

¹ Maybe it would not be that long; consider the Ten Commandments.

² This is what scientists (including economists) do when they build theories/models to predict and explain behavior: they make assumptions and then logically derive predictions/hypotheses from those assumptions.

policy. You can assert stuff like, “That policy will lead to a more efficient outcome than that policy.” but you can’t say the more efficient policy is better for society.

There are two complications when we talk about the ethics of economics: not all economists agree on the ethics of economics, and non-economists often describe our ethics in simplistic terms.

So, for now, let’s think about moral philosophy without too much thought as to how it relates to economics. We will do much relating to economics later, for now I will only throw a few tidbits as to the ethical foundations of economics.

Tidbit 1: Economists are ethical *consequentialists*: we judge actions and policies solely on the basis of their consequences/outcomes. [David Hume \(1711-1776\)](#) was one of the early consequentialists.³ On the course web page that is a *Philosophy Bites* podcast on consequentialism ([Philosophy Bites: Brad Hooker on Consequentialism](#)).⁴

Contrast consequentialists with those who judge a decision not on the basis of the consequences of that decision but rather on the process that was used to reach the decision (e.g., Did everyone get their say? Was the correct procedure followed). *Processists*?

For example, George, the Processist, in the lifeboat should be fine with being chosen for consumption by Rover and the other occupants if he was chosen by majority voting and he had agreed that dinner would be chosen by majority voting.

Consider the following argument against consequentialism, so against economics: you owe George \$100, you see, on the street, a mother with three children, all starving, you give the \$100 to them because the benefits to them are greater than the cost to George of

³ A consequentialist can care about the process because if people are influenced by the process these influences are consequences.

⁴ *Philosophy Bites* is a podcast that provides “podcasts of top philosophers interviewed on bite-sized topics...” The web site is http://www.nigelwarburton.typepad.com/philosophy_bites/. Over time I will had more and more of these podcasts to the course web page.

I was pleased to recently learn about “*Ethics Bites*, the [Open University](#) sister series of the *Philosophy Bites* podcast. *Ethics Bites* is available on iTunesU together with transcripts. [Visit Ethics Bites on iTunesU](#).

iTunesU has an amazing range of free educational audio and audiovisual podcasts, perfect for the autodidact. The Open University has its own section as do many of the major US universities and a few other UK ones (including Oxford University).

not getting his \$100. Processists would object that what you did was not right – you violated your commitment to George, even though you increased the benefits from the \$100.

Things can get confusing because there are people who are *process consequentialists*. They argue that we should judge processes for deciding on the basis of their consequences, rather than judging each specific action on the basis of its consequences.

Divine command theory

So, back to the question of where determinations of good and bad come from: One way to determine what is good or bad is to ask God or a supreme leader (think Mao or Hitler). The assumptions are that God exists, if God says it's bad, it is bad, and we can figure out what God says.

Let me relate a conversation I would have with my aunt about once a week when I was about fourteen and she was maybe fifty.

Aunt Edith, "Lusting after Margaret in English class is bad."

Me, "Why?"

Aunt, "God says so."

Me, "How do you know God thinks it is bad?"

Aunt, "It says so in the Bible."

Me, "Where is Margaret mentioned in the Bible, and how do you know the Bible is the word of God?"

Aunt, "The Bible says it is the ordained word of God."

My dad, "You kids be quiet and finish your dinner."

My aunt was not a great scholar; her ethics were based on strong religious beliefs. She did not need to think about whether something is good or bad; she only needed to determine whether God thinks it good or bad, which makes it good or bad.

There are some problems with implementing this ethical system: we don't all believe in the same God, and there are disagreements as to what God did or did not say.

For example, not all Muslims think jihad is right, but some think it will get you to Heaven. Some Christians think abortion is bad, other don't.

And, what about those godless? Without God, is there no good and bad? If Edith has lost her faith, would she have become a sociopath (had no conscience)?⁵⁶

Thinking about it more deeply, is God good; that is, does God only say that "good" things are good, or can she get it wrong - be bad?

Quoting the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker in the NTY 01132008

"Putting God in charge of morality is one way to solve the problem, of course, but Plato made short work of it 2,400 years ago. Does God have a good reason for designating certain acts as moral and others as immoral? If not — if his dictates are divine whims — why should we take them seriously? Suppose that

⁵ Not all sociopaths kill people. Simply put, they are consequentialists, care only about themselves, and are incapable of guilt or remorse - maybe a nice way to be. There is a book out by a Harvard psychologist, Martha Stout, titled [*The Sociopath next door*](#). Maybe someone could write an essay about how a sociopath would view the environment.

⁶ A recent survey (I need to find the source) found that over 50% of U.S. citizens of voting age would not vote for an atheist for President. Why? Because atheists have no morals?

God commanded us to torture a child. Would that make it all right, or would some other standard give us reasons to resist? And if, on the other hand, God was forced by moral reasons to issue some dictates and not others — if a command to torture a child was never an option — then why not appeal to those reasons directly?”

"Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death"; Exodus 21:17. Somebody could write about the “bad” things God advocates)

An important point to keep in mind is that for most of us our ethics are based, at least in part, on our religious beliefs.

A question that will arise when we consider evolutionary theories of moral philosophy is where god and religion come from. The divine command school of thought answers that god exists, so we believe in god and should follow her rules.

An alternative perspective is that we evolved, genetically and culturally, to believe in a god, so believe independent of whether there is a god: belief in god carries a survival advantage: believers are more likely to have kids who have kids.

Natural law

One possible basis for determining goodness from badness is to assume “it is good if it is “natural” and bad if it is “unnatural” as in sex between members of different species is bad, even if all parties involved enjoy the experience. It is not natural, and we have a natural disgust for the unnatural – see, for example, [*Sick, sick man: Seriously Dude: animal assault raises some interesting issues.*](#)

Admit it; you like “natural food” better than those other kinds. “Natural”, as in nature, has a nice ring to it. And, you likely describe disgusting things as unnatural.

One problem with natural law as the foundation for ethics is implementation. To determine whether something is good or bad one has to first determine whether it is natural.

Natural Law theory argues that the moral standards that drive behavior can be logically derived from considering and observing the natural order of things, in the case of humans, by identifying human nature.

It is good if it human nature because human nature is a good nature – people are naturally good—obviously everyone does not agree that people are naturally good.

This can become counterintuitive when one observes killing and other nasty stuff in nature. For example, cats like to torture mice (or so it appears). Does that make torture natural? Does it make it good?

The term “By nature” refers to beliefs and actions that do not vary by culture, time, or geographical location.⁷ Human nature must be beliefs and actions that are shared by all, or at least most, of mankind. This seems to imply that human nature is largely genetic, part of your genes. Do we have genes that tell us whether an action is good or bad?

The Catholic Church believes that people are naturally good, so it follows that behaving naturally is good.⁸

The “nature” of a hammer is to hit nails; so, is it then good for a hammer to hit nails? It has been said that slavery is natural for certain peoples. Is a hammer being bad if it is being used as a paper weight?

The hypothesis is that a moral sense is part of our human nature – we inherit a moral sense that is passed genetically from generation to generation.

Again quoting Steven Pinker (NYT 01132008)

⁷ Consider the debate of “nature versus nurture.” Those who come down on the side that all is nurture must believe that human nature, if it exists, has no genetic component.

⁸ The Catholic Church does believe in mistakes.

“A list of human universals collected by the anthropologist Donald E. Brown includes many moral concepts and emotions, including a distinction between right and wrong; empathy; fairness; admiration of generosity; rights and obligations; proscription of murder, rape and other forms of violence; redress of wrongs; sanctions for wrongs against the community; shame; and taboos.

The stirrings of morality emerge early in childhood. Toddlers spontaneously offer toys and help to others and try to comfort people they see in distress. And according to the psychologists Elliot Turiel and Judith Smetana, preschoolers have an inkling of the difference between societal conventions and moral principles. Four-year-olds say that it is not O.K. to wear pajamas to school (a convention) and also not O.K. to hit a little girl for no reason (a moral principle). But when asked whether these actions would be O.K. if the teacher allowed them, most of the children said that wearing pajamas would now be fine but that hitting a little girl would still not be.

Though no one has identified genes for morality, there is circumstantial evidence they exist. The character traits called “conscientiousness” and “agreeableness” are far more correlated in identical [twins](#) separated at birth (who share their genes but not their environment) than in adoptive siblings raised together (who share their environment but not their genes). People given diagnoses of “[antisocial personality disorder](#)” or “psychopathy” show signs of morality [blindness](#) from the time they are children. They bully younger children, torture animals, habitually lie and seem incapable of empathy or remorse, often despite normal family backgrounds. Some of these children grow up into the monsters that bilk elderly people out of their savings, rape a succession of women or shoot convenience-store clerks lying on the floor during a robbery.”

And

“When anthropologists like Richard Shweder and Alan Fiske survey moral concerns across the globe, they find that a few themes keep popping up from amid the diversity. People everywhere, at least in some circumstances and with certain other folks in mind, think it’s bad to harm others and good to help them. They have a sense of fairness: that one should reciprocate favors, reward benefactors and punish cheaters. They value loyalty to a group, sharing and solidarity among its members and conformity to its norms. They believe that it is right to defer to legitimate authorities and to respect people with high status. And they exalt purity, cleanliness and sanctity while loathing defilement, contamination and carnality.”

While one way to define natural is the result of evolution, what is natural could be determined by some other process as well.

Human nature in animals?

One place to study human nature is to study the behaviors of chimps and gorillas. If one believes in evolution, humans and higher primates are closely related. If so, “human nature” and “natural ethics” should appear, at least in a primitive form, in the great apes.

Some animals are surprisingly sensitive to the plight of others. Chimpanzees, who cannot swim, have drowned in zoo moats trying to save others. Given the chance to get food by pulling a chain that would also deliver an electric shock to a companion, rhesus monkeys will starve themselves for several days.--Wade, NYT 03202007, “Scientist finds the beginning of morality in primate behavior”

Gorillas and chimps live in social groups, like us. Studying how they interact, inter-group and intra-group, can inform us to what is human nature with respect to others. How we naturally interact with members of our own species might be termed our “natural ethic”?

Chimpanzees

“...have a rich repertoire of behaviors that serve to maintain or restore social harmony ... The embracing, kissing, patting and holding of hands that serve as greeting after separation... The long, peaceful sessions of relaxed social grooming. The sharing of food. The concern for the sick and wounded.--Jane Goodall, *My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe*, 2000, pp. 210-211.

Social emotions such as empathy and sympathy come to mind. Do animals “feel” empathy and sympathy? Or, does it just look like they do.

Many argue that it just looks like they care about other members of the group; they are just programmed to act that way, it is not a choice.

But this argument could also be applied to humans, concluding that people don’t experience empathy or sympathy. How do you know whether your friend is sympathetic to your plight or simply acts sympathetic?

How about violence and killing? Chimps do kill other chimps, just like people kill other people.⁹ And, like people, chimps are more likely to kill outside the group; intra-group killing is rare, excepting when a chimp wants to be top chimp and the top chimp does not agree, and both parties are dedicated to their cause.

Having a *conscience*

What does it mean to have a *conscience*? Is having one part of human nature?

And, does our conscience help us determine whether our actions are good or bad? Many would argue yes to the second and third questions, agreeing that a conscience is part of human nature, and that it helps us to determine right from wrong.¹⁰

What it means to have a conscience is more difficult to articulate.

Our conscience is something bestowed upon us by millions of years of evolution, if you believe in evolution. Or endowed by God, or ...

Our conscience is what makes us feel bad/guilty when we do “bad” things to others.

Conscience is a sense of obligation ultimately based in an emotional attachment to another living creature (often but not always a human being), or a group of human beings, or in some cases to humanity as a whole. Conscience does not exist without an emotional bond to someone or something.-- Stout, *The sociopath next door*, p. 25

⁹ More people kill chimps than chimps kill people

¹⁰ Note the distinction between our conscience “telling us” what is good or bad, and our conscious helping us decide whether something is good or bad. If our conscience is simply a process that we do not control, sometimes that floods us with chemicals that generate guilt, is it a message that we were bad, a signal that we should think about whether we were bad, for some other purpose, or without purpose?

In my view, a conscience helps to make one unselfish and altruistic: care for others.

According to [H.L. Mencken](#) (a dead guy famous for saying clever things), the conscience is “the inner voice that warns us that someone might be looking.”

While a conscience is human nature, there are exceptions (supposedly 4% of Americans are without one – see *The sociopath next door*).

Individuals without a conscience feel no guilt when they do harm to others because they are incapable of having feelings for others. Some names for this “affliction” are [antisocial personality disorder](#), *sociopathy*, and *psychopathy*.

Those without a conscience think of all other people and animals as resources to be used for their benefit, no matter the cost to others.

As a sociopath, I will not necessarily shoot you or neglect my child, but it would not be because doing so would make me feel bad, rather I might be put off by the mess, the screaming, or the likelihood of getting caught.

A society where all suffered from antisocial personality disorder (APD) would not be much of a society: ethics and “being nice” would be out the window. Those without a conscience view care for others as behavior to be exploited. The lone sociopath will prosper.

The equilibrium proportion of people with APD is likely positive

As an aside, some economic models come pretty close to assuming everyone suffers from APD.

In explanation, assuming one cares only about what they consume and experience is akin to assuming one feels bad things are bad only when they happen to you. Economists do acknowledge that one can get utility from the love or well-being of another – economists are not anti-love – an economist might say “I love my husband because his presence benefits me.”

Someone could write an essay exploring how economists view empathy and sacrificial acts. There is an extensive economic literature on altruism.

If having a conscience is human nature, it must, according to evolutionary theory instill some evolutionary advantage.¹¹ An advantage to whom, the individual, the group?

¹¹ The religious don’t need to appeal to evolution to explain the existence of a conscience.

Theorists initially had trouble explaining what that advantage might be. If the unit of selection is the individual, then having a conscience would be a disadvantage – those completely selfish would be more likely to reproduce. However, if the level of selection is at the level of the gene rather than the person (the basic tenet of [Sociobiology](#)), helping and caring for others, in particular one's relatives, helps to perpetrate one's heredity. Why else die to save your kid?¹²

Because you would be consumed with guilt if you did not make the sacrifice?

Because the level of selection is the group?

The absence of conscience is a convenient and appealing way to define “evil”, not an evil act but an evil person. Sociopaths are evil, or so many would conclude. If you like, this is a natural definition of evil.

Summing up, natural law advocates tend to conclude that acts that make most of us feel guilty are bad, and those things that bring us no guilt (sociopaths excepted) are good.

A problem with using feelings of guilt as a method for distinguishing between good and bad acts is that while feeling guilty is human nature, what one feels guilty about can vary significantly, often depending on the society in which one resides.

I would feel little guilt in stealing from someone in a society where everyone else is a thief – in fact, I would feel foolish if I didn't. This problem can be solved by assuming that everyone “knows” right from wrong; that knowledge, combined with a conscience will cause most people to be good at least a good part of the time.¹³

I have never heard of an economist cogitating on whether humans have a conscience, but at least one economist must have. Someone could find out.

¹² [Richard Dawkins](#) made this idea famous in his 1976 controversial and popular book [The Selfish Gene](#).

¹³ Only “part of the time” is because we make *mistakes of reason* due to faulty information or intellect. If everyone knows right from wrong, and everyone has a conscience, then bad stuff cannot happen unless mistakes of reason are made. These mistakes of reason are how the Catholic Church came to explain people behaving badly. They were clear on what were good and bad behaviors. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century basically identified the notion of a conscience (*conscientia*) as that part of us that provokes us to do right, but sometimes got it wrong. Conscience was originally a religious concept.

Conscience was supplanted for a while in the twentieth century by Freud's unreligious notion of the *superego*: the authoritarian guy in our head who told us what's ok and what's not. Freud thought it arose out of our desire to have sex with a parent – quite a stretch from Thomas Aquinas's take on conscience – having sex with one's parent is a bad idea, and will make the other parent mad. Freud is currently dead.

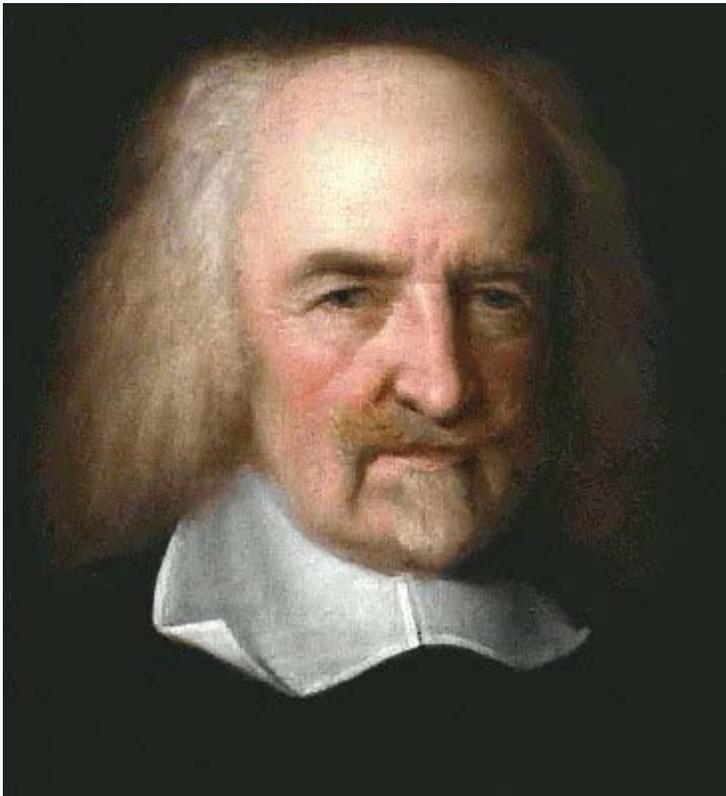
Natural law has had a big influence: appeal to natural law was very important in the development of Anglo-American [common law](#). In the struggles between [Parliament](#) and the [monarchy](#), Parliament often made reference to the [Fundamental Laws of England](#) which embodied natural law since [time immemorial](#) and set limits on the power of the monarchy. The concept of natural law was expressed in the [English Bill of Rights](#) and the [United States Declaration of Independence](#) -- and by 19th-century [anarchist](#) and legal theorist, [Lysander Spooner](#).

Note that the philosophy of Natural Law is sometimes used to justify not helping the poor; as in, "the poor will always be with us (they are a natural component of mankind), so to have poor is natural and good. Doesn't the Bible say the poor will always be with us?"

The other side of this coin is that it is natural to have rich people, so having rich people is good. The issue, an important one, is whether inequality is the natural order.

Investigating the history of philosophy one finds that many thinkers have considered the issue of what is natural and whether man is naturally good. There is a lot of disagreement on whether man is inherently good.

Preaching the antithesis of human nature as the foundation of ethics, [Thomas Hobbs](#), a [great 17th Century British philosopher](#),



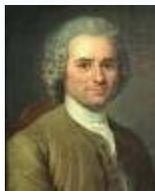
thought the natural state of humans sucked (he described man's life in the state of nature as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short); government was needed to force us to be unnaturally good.

At the same time, [Pascal](#), 1623-1662, the great mathematician and philosopher noted, "All men naturally hate each other."



A modern view of man as inherently evil is [William Golding's](#) novel, *Lord of the Flies*. Golding wrote the book in hope of proving that all humans are born with an innate evil, and it is the job of humans to contain that evil. Lord of the Flies

A century after the 17th, bucking the tide of the enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, found natural, idealized man, good but found modern man ruined by civilization. See Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*.



For Hobbs betterment implied forcing us to be unnatural, and for Rousseau betterment required moving back towards the natural state. Rousseau ascribed to the human nature view of moral philosophy – for Rousseau the existence of society was a mistake.

Another antithesis to human nature at the foundation of moral philosophy is [*tabula rasa*](#), the idea that we are born a blank slate, so without a nature. Quoting Dr. Wiki, "...our modern idea of the theory is mostly attributed to [John Locke](#)'s expression of the idea in [*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*](#) in the 17th century. In Locke's philosophy, *tabula rasa* was the theory that the (human) mind is at birth a "blank slate" without rules for processing data, and that data is added and rules for processing are formed solely by one's [sensory](#) experiences.... As understood by Locke, *tabula rasa* meant that the mind of the individual was born "blank", and it also emphasized the individual's freedom to author his or her own [soul](#). Each individual was free to define the content of his or her character - but his or her basic identity as a member of the human species cannot be so altered.... It is of interest how our conception of human nature has evolved over time, and how its characteristics differ.

See Wikipedia on [Natural Law](#) and on [Conscience](#)

See also

Nicholas Wade, NYT 03102007, [Scientist finds the beginning of morality in primate behavior](#)

Steven Pinker, [The Moral Instinct](#), NYT 01132008

[Good Natured - The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals](#), Frans de Waal, a primatologist looks at human nature

And

S. Milgram, Behavioral study of obedience, *Journal of abnormal and social psychology* 67 (1963): 371-378. – People will do bad things if the “man” tells them to. [See a description of the study in Wikipedia](#)

Evolutionary theories of ethics and morality

Put simply, our ethics are based on both genetic and cultural evolution, and are “well chosen” in that they are the result of natural selection – they have an evolutionary advantage over other ethics.

“Good” is this view of the world is that which gives an evolutionary advantage.

Theories of right and wrong based on evolution, genetic and cultural, are allied to ethics based on Natural Law.

Evolution was mentioned a few times in the previous section on Natural law. If all human nature is the result of genetic and cultural evolution, then what is natural is the result of evolution (cultural and genetic), and there would be no reason for separate sections on Natural Law theories of ethics and evolutionary theories of ethics. **Maybe I need to combine them? Nah!**

I draw a distinction between the two because many believe human nature is the foundation of ethics but human nature is not the result of evolution. For example, most religions do not believe in evolution. My guess is that most Americans do not believe that what is natural is evolving based on evolutionary forces.

The other distinction is that in the Natural Law perspective, natural is good simply because it is natural, but in the evolutionary perspective, natural is good is because it has been subjected to survival of the fittest.

Put simply, from an evolutionary perspective, cultural norms are the product of evolution: groups with rules of behavior and interaction that lead to in-group cooperation have a greater probability of survival and expansion, so become more prevalent and common.

This section is a work in progress. I will mention *sociobiology*, cultural evolution, and the work of Ken Bitmore, an economist and game theorist.

Sociobiology

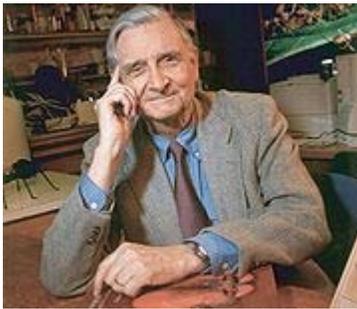
In the words of Wikipedia,

Sociobiology is based on the idea that some behaviors (both social and individual) are at least partly inherited and can be affected by [natural selection](#). It starts with the idea that these behaviors have evolved over time, similar to the way that physical traits are thought to have evolved. Therefore, it predicts that animals will act in ways that have proven to be evolutionarily successful over time, which can among other things result in the formation of complex social processes that have proven to be conducive to evolutionary fitness.

The discipline seeks to explain behavior as a product of natural selection, thus behavior is seen as an effort to preserve one's genes in the population. Inherent in sociobiological reasoning is the idea that certain genes or gene combinations that influence particular behavioral traits can be "passed down" from generation to generation.

[Click here](#) for the rest of the Wiki discussion of sociobiology.

Sociobiology is not only about ethics and their evolution, but more broadly about the evolution of social behaviors – the emphasis is on genetic rather than cultural evolution. [E.O. Wilson](#), the Harvard Biologist and world expert on ants, started the field which he defines as "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior."



In the words of Wikipedia,

By applying the evolutionary principles that went a long way to explaining the behavior of the social insects to understanding the social behavior of other animals, including humans, Wilson established sociobiology as a new scientific field. He argued that all animal behavior, including that of humans, is the product of [heredity](#) and environmental stimuli and past experiences, and that [free will](#) is an illusion. He has referred to the biological basis of behaviour as the "genetic leash." The sociobiological view is that all animal social behavior is governed by [epigenetic](#) rules worked out by the laws of [evolution](#). This theory and research proved to be seminal, controversial, and influential.

The controversy of sociobiological research is in how it applies to humans. The theory established a scientific argument for rejecting the common doctrine of [tabula rasa](#) (Latin for blank slate), which holds that human beings are born without any innate mental content and that culture functions to increase human knowledge and aid in survival and success. In the final chapter of the book *Sociobiology* and in the full text of his [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning *On Human Nature*, Wilson argues that the human mind is shaped as much by genetic inheritance as it is by culture (if not more). There are limits on just how much influence social and environmental factors can have in altering human behavior.

(What would it mean for consumer theory if we lacked free will?)

The theory was controversial, and remains controversial, but less so. When I was looking for my first academic job in the U.S., I mentioned in an interview that I was interested in sociobiology; that comment, I believe, nicked my job prospects at the State University of New York at Buffalo – in retrospect, a good thing. Economists assume individuals have

free choice, a view that is not consistent with human behavior being genetically determined.

Many people are comfortable with sociobiology as long it is limited to explaining the behavior of non-human animals.

As an aside, Wilson believes that belief in God and religious practices are products of evolution.

Sociobiology is akin the notion of *The Selfish Gene*, proposed by [Richard Dawkins](#), mentioned in the section on Natural Law.

[Steven Pinker](#) (see his NY Times article on the [course web page](#)) is linked to sociobiology in that he advocates that our sense of morality has a hardwired evolutionary component.

For us, a critical topic in sociobiology is altruism (unselfish concern for the welfare of others). More specifically why is altruism observed: what evolutionary advantage does it convey, and is there some evolutionary stable level of altruism?

Put very simply, one's gene pool is more likely to survive you if you are nice to others, particularly those who share your genes – if I am nice to my relatives and they are nice to me, our kind of genes are more likely to survive.

In more detail, consider *nepotistic altruism* and *reciprocal altruism*. Nepotistic altruism occurs when you are nice to people that share your genes (your relatives). You might be nice to these people even if you do not expect them to return the favor: being nice to them makes it more likely your kind of genes will survive. Most parents nurture their un-nice children.

[Reciprocal altruism](#) occurs when I am nice to you because I expect you will return the favor, likewise for you. It does not require that we are related. If reciprocal altruism increases the probability of the group surviving, and there is a gene for reciprocal altruism, survival will select for it.¹⁴ If we are all nice to each other, a Pareto improvement will result.

There are economic models of altruism. For example, reciprocal altruism could be described as utility-maximizing cooperative behavior.

Some view altruism as an ethical system: one has a moral obligation to be nice to others. Sociobiology would suggest the obligation is hard-wired in our genes.

An important factoid for the genetic-evolution argument for ethics and morals is that that both vary from culture to culture, so must have something in addition to a genetic component. If the evolutionary argument is correct, how much of it is genetic transmission and how much cultural transmission.

¹⁴ The existence of reciprocal altruism does not require such a gene.

In addition to the previous readings, see

Cultural evolution

Put simply, cultural norms are the product of evolution: groups with rules of behavior and interaction that lead to in-group cooperation have a greater probability of survival and expansion, so become more prevalent and common.

The distinction between cultural evolution and genetic evolution is in how behaviors are passed from generation to generation: through the gene pool or through each generation teaching their beliefs, culture and morals to their children.

The two processes coexist.

For example altruism could be passed from generation to generation through learning (explicit and imitation) or genetics.

An integrated theory of cultural and genetic evolution

[Jonathan Haidt](#) (a psychology professor at the U. of Virginia), presents an integrated theory of the genetic and cultural evolution of morals and ethics. He surmises that we have five hard-wired moral spheres/systems: two for protecting the individual (*care/preventing harm to others* and *fairness/reciprocity*) and three that strengthen the group (*loyalty* to the group, *purity* (avoiding disgust) and *authority* (respect for traditions and institutions)). These are hard wired and the result of evolution.

The specific ethics that result from these spheres are learned, varying from cultural to cultural with different cultures putting different relative weights on the five moral spheres.¹⁵

Note purity. Purity is not something that economists think much about, but maybe we should. Economists think the solution for many of the world's problems is to create markets where no markets currently exist: markets for pollution, drugs, human organs, prostitution, etc. However, many would find such markets repugnant: disgusting – “how can one sanction, with a market, such disgusting behavior.”¹⁶

¹⁵According to Wikipedia, “Haidt found that Americans who identified as [liberals](#) tended to value care and fairness higher than loyalty, respect, and purity. Self-identified [conservative](#) Americans valued care and fairness less, and the remaining three values more. Both groups gave care the highest over-all weighting, but conservatives valued fairness the lowest, whereas liberals valued purity the lowest.”

¹⁶ See, Roth, Alvin E., (2007) Repugnance as a constraint on markets, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 97(3), 828-851.

Evolutionary game theory as a foundation for ethics

Game theories are theories economists and others develop and test to explain the outcome of games (interactions among individual or groups where what I do affects what you do and what you do affects what I do – a game). Another word for a game is a social interaction.

Often games/interactions are repeated, called *repeated games*: every morning the wife, kid, dog and I interact in the game of get to work and school – everyone's behavior affects everyone.

Games evolve: games mutate over time, games that lead to good outcomes are more likely to survive and those that lead to bad outcomes less likely, or so is my understanding of evolutionary game theory.

The idea is that are social interactions/games have evolved over time, and are good in the sense that the games we play beat out other games in terms of group welfare.

Discuss the work of [Ken Binmore](#) on the evolution of ethics and morality. Binmore is a well-known economist and game theorist.

From Wikipedia

Binmore's work in political and moral philosophy began in the 1980s The result was his two-volume *Game Theory and the Social Contract*, an ambitious attempt to lay the foundations for a genuine science of morals using the theory of games. In *Game Theory and the Social Contract* Binmore proposes a naturalistic reinterpretation of [John Rawls'](#) original position that reconciles his egalitarian theory of justice with [John Harsanyi's](#) utilitarian theory. His recent *Natural Justice* provides a nontechnical synthesis of this work.

Quoting from the book cover to *Natural Justice*,

This book lays out foundations for a "science of morals." Binmore uses game theory as a systematic tool for investigating ethical matters. He reinterprets classical social contract ideas within a game-theory framework and generates new insights into the fundamental questions of social philosophy. In contrast to the previous writing in moral philosophy that relied on vague notion such as "societal well-being" and "moral duty," Binmore begins with individuals; rational decision-makers with the ability to emphasize with one another. Any social arrangement that prescribes them to act against their interests will become unstable and eventually will be replaced by another, until one is found that includes worthwhile actions for all individuals involved.

If I understand correctly, Binmore would not say our ethics and moral are good or bad, but rather they are what they are.

The book begins:

What should we be aiming for? Wherein lies our duty? How ought we live? Such questions have been debated for millennia, but to so little effect that moral philosophers commonly agree that the sum of their endeavors should count as not more than a footnote to Plato. How could so little have been achieved in such a long time?

I think that orthodox moral philosophy has gotten nowhere because it asks the wrong questions. If morality evolved along with the human race, then asking how we ought to live makes as much sense as asking what animals ought to exist, or which language we ought to speak.

The authority claimed by gurus who argue to the contrary is conjured from nowhere. They no more have access to some noumenal world of moral absolutes than the boy who delivers our newspapers. Like the rest of us, they actually get their intuitions from observing the **real** rules that govern our moral behavior. These are not the absurdly impractical moral principles we teach our children, but which they quickly learn to classify alongside Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy....

The moral rules that really govern our behavior consist of a mixture of instincts, customs, and conventions that are simultaneously more mundane and more complex than traditional scholarship is willing to credit. They are shaped largely by evolutionary forces – social as well as biological. If one wishes to study such rules, it doesn't help to ask how they advance the Good or preserve the Right. One must ask instead how they evolved and why they survive. That is to say, we need to treat our morality as a science.

One would conjecture that the book is not popular with advocates of orthodox moral philosophy.

Rights Theory

Obama: Health Care Plan Would Give Seniors Right To Choose How They Are Killed

The Onion, October 6, 2009 | [Issue 45•41](#)

Right-To-Kill Advocate Opposes Right-To-Die Measure

The Onion, 11.12.03 | [Issue 39•44](#)

Right-to-Die Controversy

The Onion, January 22, 1997 | [Issue 31•02](#)

Right-to-die has been a hot issue of late, with both pro- and anti-right-to-die forces holding large demonstrations across the U.S. What do *you* think of physician-assisted suicide?



Sandra Gregorian,

Systems Analyst

"I believe I have the right to die. I also believe I have the right to say: 'I'm not gonna pay a lot for this muffler.'"



Oliver Mielecki,

Botanist

"Everyone has a right to die. Especially all those people I'm planning to stab to death."



Wayne Buice,
Student

"My poor mother broke her leg last May, and we had no choice but to put her down."



Theo Crawford,
Plumber

"If right-to-die legislation had been passed years ago, think of all that would have been lost—like the last two seasons of *The Golden Girls*."



Nancy Rivers,
Accountant

"Apple, pecan, cherry. I think *every* person has the right to pie."



Matt Polan,
Caterer

"If you're brain-dead and hooked up to life support, it doesn't matter if you die or not, just as long as you try your best. That's all anyone can ask."

You have heard all the phrases: “human rights”, “animal rights”, “women’s rights”, the “right to life”, “the right to die” “the right to privacy” “abortion rights”, “civil rights” and the favorite of economists, “property rights.”

[Thomas Jefferson](#), proposed [unalienable rights](#) in the [Declaration of Independence](#)

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Rights Theory says that your actions are good if you have the “right” to do them and bad if they violate someone else’s rights.

What exactly is a right? For example, what does it mean to have a “right to die.” It means that one can choose to die. Rights theory would conclude that if you have this right and act on it, the action is good, not bad.

Contrast having a right to die with a “duty to die” – very different things. We have duties to not violate the rights of others. Such violations are bad and abiding the rights of others is good.¹⁷ Rights and duties are two sides of the same coin: if I have a right, you have a duty to not violate that right.

What exactly is conveyed by a right? Extreme property-rights advocates believe ownership of a property give the owner the right to do with the property as he will, including trashing it. Does the owner of a Monet have the right to use it as a dartboard?

If you have a right to life, does that mean simply that it is wrong for me to kill you, or does it mean I have a duty to keep you alive?

How does a right to life differ from a “right of live”? Should something have a right to life even though even though they are not currently alive, for example, a member of some future generation, or a frozen embryo?

To implement rights theory one has to first decide who has rights (has *moral standing*, is a member of society) and then what rights all member should have, and then decide how other rights are conveyed.¹⁸

¹⁷ The distinction between a “duty” and a “choice” is an interesting one. In the U.S., taking care of one’s old and infirm parents is typically a choice, but in many other cultures it is a duty.

¹⁸ For example, many Westerners morally exclude Osama bin Laden, along with many others. Once you are excluded, you are fair game to be “neutralized.” Labeling someone a “terrorist” is tantamount to making them an “it.” When I was a kid, Communists had no moral standing – they wanted, we were told, to nuke

For example, society might decide that all members have a right to life in the sense that they have a right not to be killed, but that one only has the right to a Big Mac if one has bought it or someone has bought it for you.

In the U.S., all have the right not to be murdered, but only those with enough wealth have acquired the right to drives a Mercedes.

In contrast, in a pure communist state, everyone has equal rights to what is produced.

The Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights, are a manifestation of rights theory. So, violating these rights is bad, honoring them is good, or so say Rights Theory.

Rights theorists are not consequentialists. If one has the right to do something, doing it is ok, even if the outcome sucks.

us into oblivion. Israelis have no moral standing with many Palestinians, and Palestinians have no moral standing with many Israelis. I morally exclude those who do cross-word puzzles, except for my wife.

Utilitarianism (from the Latin *utilis*, useful)

Utilitarians equate good with pleasure and happiness, and bad with pain and suffering. Put simply, an action is good if it generates feelings of pleasure, contentment, or happiness, and bad if the action generates feelings of pain, suffering, or anxiety.¹⁹ Sounds simple.

The experience of pain or pleasure is at the level of the individual, be it a person or an animal.

The first question, as usual, is whose pain and pleasure? Who counts – who has moral standing? Most Utilitarians only count humans but the founders of Utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, thought it should apply to all sentient being, even women.²⁰

Someone could write an essay on these guys (one or both of them) and the role they played in the development of Utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is fairly straightforward if one is thinking it terms of one individual in isolation, a society of one. In this simple case, anything that makes the individual better off is good, and anything that makes her worse off is bad.

Who is the judge of the individual's pleasure or pain, the individual herself, or some other party? Utilitarians typically assume the individual is the best judge of their own welfare.²¹

The rub comes when a group of individuals all have moral standing: what makes one individual better off typically makes some other individual or individuals worse off. In this case, Utilitarians believe that net pleasure (total pleasure minus total suffering) should be maximized. That is, maximizing net benefits is good and failing to do so it bad – remind you of economics?

But how? How does one add up pleasures and pains across the members of society? Bentham and Mill thought this possible, but many today do not agree.²²

¹⁹ That said, now and then some of us like a little pain and angst.

²⁰ Not everyone uses the word sentient in the same. Bentham and Mill meant able to feel pleasure and pain. More typically, sentient means one has conscious awareness of oneself (one is aware of oneself and ones surrounding and aware of the distinction between the two)

²¹ Recent research in psychology suggests that this might not be true: people *miswant* and poorly predict how they will adapt to a new state of affairs (see the section of the course on happiness). For cursory details see, xxxxx.

²² Quoting from Wikipedia, Another difficulty with utilitarianism is that of comparing happiness among different people. Many of the early utilitarians hoped that happiness could somehow be measured quantitatively and compared between people through [felicific calculus](#) (happiness calculus), although no one has ever managed to construct a detailed one in practice. It has been argued that the happiness of

A basic tenet of Utilitarianism is that the pains and pleasures of all should get equal weight when they are summed into net benefit. If a pig and a human both have moral standing, their pains and pleasures should get equal weight.

The terms *utility* is from Utilitarianism.

Utilitarians are consequentialists, one does not judge good or bad on the basis of the act, but on the consequences of the act.

For example, a pure Utilitarian would conclude that the brutal killing of one's baby is good if the act brings the parent more satisfaction than it brought pain to the victim.²³ Economists are consequentialists.

If someone had, for the fun of it, viciously murdered the baby Hitler, a Utilitarian might judge it a good act, assuming the Utilitarian knew what baby Hitler would have become. That is, an act can be good even if the intent was bad.

To implement Utilitarianism one needs to assume that there is some cardinal index of pleasure and pain (e.g. utility) that is comparable across individuals, and that can be measured.

Some people, not me, believe that willingness-to-pay in dollars is such a measure.²⁴ That is, the action is good if the wtp on the part of the gainers to have the policy implemented is greater than the wtp on the part of the losers to stop the policy from being implemented. I do not believe Bentham or Mill believed this.

All of this should remind you of [Vilfredo Pareto](#). If an action makes some members of society better off and makes no members worse off, we deem this action a *Pareto Improvement*. All Utilitarians think Pareto Improvements good, at least when they agree

different people is incommensurable, and thus felicific calculus is impossible, not only in practice, but even in principle. Defenders of utilitarianism reply that this problem is faced by anyone who has to choose between two alternative states of affairs where both impose burdens to the people involved. If happiness were incommensurable, the death of a hundred people would be no worse than the death of one. [Triage](#) is an example of a real world situation where utilitarianism seems to be applied successfully.

²³ Quoting from Wikipedia, "That the pleasure of a [sadist](#) should have the same importance as the pleasure of an [altruist](#) has been criticized. Supporters [of Utilitarianism] note that, in practice, altruistic acts help many more people and hurt many fewer than do sadistic ones, so that in practice utilitarianism almost always condemns sadism and sanctions altruism."

²⁴ I estimate wtp for a living.

on who is and who is not a member of society. Utilitarians would view actions that make everyone worse off as bad.

Actions that make some better and others worse off, and where the gain to gainers (in monetary units) is greater than the loss to the losers are deemed, by economists, *Potential Pareto Improvements*. They are called potential P.I.s because there is the potential to compensate the losers so that some, or all, gain and no one loses. If the compensation actually takes place, the action, with the compensation, is a P.I. An action being a P.P.I. is equivalent to benefits greater than costs. Utilitarians would not say that all P.P.I are good, neither would all economists.

Note that Utilitarianism does not decide good and bad in the same way as *majority rule*. The majority might be in favor of some action but if the pleasure they would get from its implementation is less than the pain imposed on the minority, Utilitarians would view the action as bad – “the tyranny of the majority”.

A few further thoughts:

If one believes that we each have cardinal preferences and that those units are comparable across individuals, one probably also believes in diminishing marginal utility: one gets more utils from the first million dollars than they do from the hundredth million.²⁵ If you are a Utilitarian that believes in diminishing marginal utility, you would likely advocate taking from the rich and giving to the poor because if everyone counts equally and a poor person gets more utility from an extra 10K than the decrease in utility the rich guy would experience from taking 10K from him, transferring the money increases net utility.

Wikipedia has an interesting, and more detailed discussion of [Utilitarianism](#) – see, in particular, “Criticisms of Utilitarianism”

²⁵ Alternatively, if one believes preferences only have ordinal properties, the concept of marginal utility has no meaning, so diminishing marginal utility has no meaning.

Another school of thought is that “good and bad” have little meaning

Herodotus, the Greek Historian (c. 484 – 420 BC) noted that each society regards its own belief system and way of doing things as better than all others.

To summarize this perspective, actions can be liked by you and disliked by me, but that does not make them good or bad in any cosmic sense of the word.

People have preferences, and do what is best for them. Preferences are not judged as good or bad: you like pizza and I like to blow up frogs, whatever.

While intellectuals are attracted to this position, it is a position that many on the street view as wrong. George Bush will likely find this viewpoint morally foul- he believes in the existence of evil.²⁶

This school of moral philosophy is often referred to as moral relativism (there are no objective rights and wrongs – “it is all relative”).

In the words of wiki:

In [philosophy](#) **moral relativism** is the position that [moral](#) or [ethical](#) propositions do not reflect [objective](#) and/or universal moral truths, but instead make claims [relative](#) to [social](#), [cultural](#), [historical](#) or [personal](#) circumstances. Moral relativists hold that no universal standard exists by which to assess an ethical proposition's truth. Relativistic positions often see moral [values](#) as applicable only within certain cultural boundaries ([cultural relativism](#)) or in the context of individual preferences ([individualist ethical subjectivism](#)). An extreme relativist position might suggest that judging the moral or ethical judgments or acts of another person or group has no meaning, though most relativists propound a more limited version of the theory. In moral relativism there are no absolute, concrete rights and wrongs. Rather, intrinsic ethical judgments exist as abstracta, differing for each perception of an ethical outlook.

.....

Moral relativism differs from [value pluralism](#) — which acknowledges the co-existence of opposing ideas and practices, but accepts limits to differences, such as when vital human needs are violated. Moral relativism, in contrast, grants the possibility of moral judgments that do not accept such limits. As well, moral relativism should not be taken as the more extreme stance of [moral nihilism](#), which completely denies the existence of any objective morality.^{[[citation needed](#)]}

One person’s (culture’s) good is another’s bad. One can only judge good from bad in a specific cultural context (cultural relativism).

²⁶ The web site <http://irregulartimes.com/evilwar.html> has many of George’s quotes on evil.

Moral relativism scares people: if right and wrong do not have universal meaning, we will run amok doing whatever, causing society to go down the toilet.

Economists while not being moral relativists hold views consistent with moral relativism:

“Osama bin Laden, is trying to maximize his utility, like you and me. Who am I to say whether his preferences are good or bad.”

Taken to its extreme a moral relativist would not find it immoral if you killed him and killing him was ok from your moral perspective. “In your culture it is ok to eat babies and you ate mine. I can scream and yell, but can’t find you immoral.”

Quoting again from Wiki

Anthropologists such as [Ruth Benedict](#) (1887 – 1948) cautioned observers against [ethnocentrism](#) — using the standards of their own culture to evaluate their subjects of study. Benedict said that morals do not exist — only customs do; and that in comparing customs, the anthropologist "insofar as he remains an anthropologist . . . is bound to avoid any weighting of one in favor of the other". To some extent, the increasing body of knowledge of great differences in belief among societies caused both [social scientists](#) and philosophers to question whether any objective, absolute standards pertaining to values could exist. This led some to posit that differing systems have equal validity, with no standard for adjudicating among conflicting beliefs. The Finnish philosopher-anthropologist [Edward Westermarck](#) (1862 – 1939) ranks as one of the first to formulate a detailed theory of moral relativism. He portrayed all moral ideas as subjective judgments that reflect one's upbringing. He rejected [G.E. Moore's](#) (1873 – 1958) [ethical intuitionism](#) — in vogue during the early part of the 20th century, and which identified moral propositions as true or false, and known to us through a special faculty of intuition — because of the obvious differences in beliefs among societies, which he said provided evidence of the lack of any innate, intuitive power.

Quoting from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

[Moral Relativism](#)

First published Thu Feb 19, 2004; substantive revision Tue Dec 9, 2008

Moral relativism has the unusual distinction—both within philosophy and outside it—of being attributed to others, almost always as a criticism, far more often than it is explicitly professed by anyone. Nonetheless, moral relativism is a standard topic in metaethics, and there are contemporary philosophers who defend forms of it: The most prominent are Gilbert Harman and David B. Wong. The term ‘moral relativism’ is understood in a variety of ways. Most often it is associated with an empirical thesis that there are deep and widespread moral disagreements and a metaethical thesis that the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to some group of persons. Sometimes ‘moral relativism’ is connected with a normative position about how we ought to think about or act towards those with whom we morally disagree, most commonly that we should tolerate them.

Suggested additional readings on moral philosophy (the ethics of good and bad)

[Lecture on Moral Philosophies \(excluding Utilitarianism\)- E.R. Morey - .wav file](#)

[Lecture on Utilitarianism with a bit more at the beginning about Natural Law - E.R. Morey - .mpeg file](#)

[A survey of ethical ideas and theories - VanDeVeer and Pierce](#)

[Good Natured - The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals](#), Frans de Waal, a primatologist looks at human nature

[30 Seconds on John Rawls and the Theory of Justice](#)

[Nicholas Wade, NYT 03102007, Scientist finds the beginning of morality in primate behavior, Nicolas Wade, NYT 03202007](#)

[Steven Pinker, The Moral Instinct, Steven Pinker, NYT 01132008](#)

Add other readers that are on the web page for this section

Being Good: a short introduction to ethics, Simon Blackburn, a philosophy professor at Cambridge. (Available for \$10 at amazon.com) – You could critique some aspect of this book for an essay.

S. Milgram, Behavioral study of obedience, *Journal of abnormal and social psychology* 67 (1963): 371-378. – People will do bad things if the “man” tells them to. [See the discussion of the study at Wikipedia](#)