

## TEXT SUPPLEMENT (Ch 1): Other Ethical Systems

In addition to deontological and utilitarian ethical systems described in the text (chapter 1), there are several others that we briefly describe here.

### Egoism to Jainism

One question that quickly arises in a cost–benefit analysis is ‘benefit to whom?’ A spectrum of answers to this question can be used to distinguish a series of ethical systems. At one end of this spectrum lies egoism, an ethical system in which acts are judged solely in terms of their consequences for one individual or group. Under individual egoism, acts are judged according to whether they have beneficial or harmful consequences for *me*. Under group egoism, acts are judged according to whether their consequences are beneficial or harmful for the group (family, tribe, nation) to which I belong. Under any form of egoism, the costs and benefits to ‘others,’ outside of myself or my group, are given subordinate status or are ignored entirely. In a world where only one group existed, group egoism would become indistinguishable from utilitarianism.

Differences arise according to whether we seek to maximize goodness just for ourselves, or for ourselves and our family, or our entire tribe or ethnic group, our nation, all humankind, all intelligent species, all animals (or ‘sentient beings’), all life forms (including trees and bacteria), or the entire cosmos. On this spectrum, individual egoism occupies one pole and utilitarianism occupies the middle. The opposite pole comes close to the ethical teachings of certain Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and especially Jainism, which seeks to maximize goodness in the cosmos.

### Natural-law ethics

Nature-based ethics, or natural-law ethics, is based on the general idea that people should imitate nature, or that whatever is natural is always best. There are several ways of looking to nature for ethical guidance, including the following:

- Whatever occurs in nature is necessarily good.
- Whatever occurs in nature is always to be preferred over what is not.
- Whatever occurs in nature is in harmony with the rest of nature.
- Whatever occurs in nature is the product of

natural selection (see Chapter 5), and is therefore favored by nature.

- Whatever maximizes fitness (i.e., results in more offspring) will be favored in the course of evolution, and is therefore to be preferred in human affairs also.

According to natural-law ethics, we should look to the animal and plant world for ethical guidance. Acts that occur in nature are judged to be right; artificial or unnatural acts are judged to be wrong. By this criterion, one could argue that eating meat raw is preferable to eating meat cooked. Even more problematic is the occurrence in nature of incompatible forms of behavior: should parents guard and protect their children, abandon their children, or cannibalize and eat their children? Nature-based ethics provide no guidance in this decision, for natural examples can be found for all these types of behavior!

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) made a careful distinction between things that *are* and things that *ought to be*. Things that *are* can be investigated by scientific means, which includes setting up falsifiable hypotheses and examining evidence. On the other hand, things that *ought to be* are not subject to this kind of examination. Under this premise, nature offers an insufficient basis for any ethical system.

### Ethical relativism

Adherents of ethical relativism take the position that each society may have its own system of ethical judgement, different from the rest, all such ethical systems being equally valid. This position is often urged upon those about to visit societies very different from their own, admonishing them not to judge other societies by the (probably different) ethical standards of their own society. The empirically testable theory that different cultures do in fact sometimes make different ethical judgements is called cultural relativism, an important finding of descriptive ethics. Ethical relativism, as a form of normative ethics, goes one step further in proclaiming that values *should* vary (ought to vary) from one society to the next according to each society’s needs and circumstances. Under ethical relativism, any cultural trait can be judged socially good if it operates harmoniously within its cultural setting and serves to promote that culture’s goals.