

The Demise of Ethical Monism
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[ABSTRACT]

The development of ethical theories, rather than the application of those theories to practical situations, is usually considered to be a distinctly philosophical endeavor. Each moral philosopher argues that his or her development is the "one right way" to evaluate human behavior. I call this "one right way" ethical monism. I argue that there is a two way learning process between moral philosophy and applied ethics. Applied ethics must carry moral principles (usually monist) into practical situation. But moral philosophy has much to learn from the application of its moral principles as well. Ethical monism seems wrong-there are well known fundamental conflicts between consequentialism and deontology. There are also internal conflicts within various versions of "the right way"-one need only consider the clash of Kantian personal autonomy with Kantian human dignity in the context of physician-assisted suicide. Not only does ethical monism seem false, it seems to have been narrowly anthropocentric. The need to break entirely new moral theoretic ground, such as the development of bio-centric and eco-centric environmental ethics, further illustrates the need to reassess ethical monism. My argument is unabashedly pluralist-major and legitimate ethical theories can conflict. But these conflicts need not mire us in ethical relativism, nihilism, nor a hopelessly post-modern subjectivity. The lesson from applied ethics for theoretical moral philosophy is to move away from monism and toward developing a much richer mix of ethical theories. These points are illustrated by examples from Business Ethics, Environmental Ethics, and Medical Ethics.

Moral philosophers, such as Kant, Hume, and Mill, derive moral principles in various ways. Kant consults the requirements of a consistent reason to determine the right principles that ought to govern human action. Hume appeals to a moral sense that seems to recognize and capture what we determine is the right decision and action. Mill considers the human experience to determine what all humans (and some animals) desire-happiness; he concludes, therefore, that actions causing the greatest possible amount of happiness are right actions. Each moral philosopher considers their ethical theory to be morally superior to alternative ethical theories. I shall use the term "ethical monism" to refer to the view that there is one right way to judge the morality of human actions.

Moral truth must begin with meta-ethics, i.e., with principles that do not, themselves, depend upon any specific normative ethical theory. Here I outline four general principles that I accept as governing all normative ethical theories, including those of Kant, Hume, and Mill. The argument against ethical monism that I outline below depends crucially upon these four meta-ethic understandings which I shall take as axiomatic-although I will argue briefly for accepting each of them.

The first meta-ethic understanding is the recognition that there are two important dimensions to human experience and, specifically, to human decision-making: fact and value. This Humean distinction between "is" and "ought" reminds us that the mere notice or recitation of descriptive facts will, in itself, provide absolutely no prescriptive or value content. We must avoid committing G.E. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy." For example, my telling you how I brought my pistol to class and shot dead an inattentive student does not tell you one whit about the moral correctness or incorrectness of my action. Something else must be added to supply moral overtones to my action. The different dimensions of fact and value can be realized through an analogy to spatial dimensions. I cannot get to Memphis by going straight up; I have to travel the horizontal (surface) direction to get there. Just as spatial dimensionality is a condition of human experience, fact and value are two independent dimensions of human experience. With one possible exception, we do not need to accept or reject any normative ethic to recognize this dimensionality; it is truly a meta-ethic principle. (Virtue ethics, derived from Aristotle's naturalism, does appear to fall victim to this first meta-ethic principle, but that is a subject for another paper.)

The second meta-ethic understanding relates to how we detect the value dimension of human experience. What Hume called the "sentiment of approbation" allows us to detect value, just as our intellect allows us to understand fact. We humans, then, have two different detectors with which to experience the two independent dimensions of fact and value. (Hume's further conclusion that the moral sense is the only

source of value is, I think, clearly false: my meta-ethic understanding is that our moral senses are facilitators to our moral decision making, but they are not the intellectual source of moral value.) We do not need to accept or reject any normative ethic to recognize the existence of this moral sense; it, too, is a truly meta-ethic principle.

The third meta-ethic understanding provides an intellectual component to our moral decision-making. There is a direct parallel between ethics and science in justifying our claims - claims about moral truth and claims about scientific truth.¹ We use scientific theories to justify our claims about the world. For example, our claim that, upon looking east in the morning, "the sun is rising" was for centuries justified by geocentric astronomical theory. Today, we refer to a different astronomical theory, that of Copernicus and Galileo, to justify our claim that sunrise is really "the earth rotating east on its axis." (While I believe there is a further parallel in how we develop, test, and accept or reject theories within both science and ethics that too is the subject for a different paper.) The intellectual content of our moral recognition and, most importantly, our moral decision-making is provided by normative ethical theory. To justify our moral claims we must (among other things) refer to an overarching ethical principle or theory to justify our claim of moral correctness.² Without such a reference point, our moral judgements remain essentially Humean and subjective, with little else to recommend them beyond the subjectivity to which we are each entitled. The claim that moral judgements receive their legitimacy, in part, from covering ethical theory does not depend on any specific normative ethical theory; this third understanding, then, is a truly meta-ethic principle.

The fourth meta-ethic understanding refers to the complex process that humans use to make moral decisions and take subsequent actions. While testing our alternative moral judgements in a specific moral decision-making situation, it is not sufficient merely to sense competing values and to refer to overarching ethical theories. We must also have an urge to decision and action—we must form an attitude, preference, impulse or feeling of obligation—part of a "qualified moral attitude."³ This urge supplies the stimulus for moral decision-making. Since this urge is a sense of felt obligation (or, in degenerate cases, moral rationalizing) rather than a reference to a specific ethical theory, it, too, is a truly meta-ethic principle.

This brief meta-ethic discussion provides four principles that can be recognized and used in applying normative ethical theory to specific situations. For example, these principles drive moral decision-making concerning business, medicine, and the environment and will help us to understand the crucial interaction that normative ethical theory has with the application of those theories in human experience. Before proceeding, let us describe briefly the ethical monism, respectively, of Kant, Hume, and Mill.

Ethical monism is the claim that a specific ethical theory is the "one right way" for deciding moral correctness. The certainty held by moral philosophers can be striking. Consider Kant: "The supreme principle of the science of morals ... is this: 'Act according to a maxim which can likewise be valid as a universal law.' Every maxim which is not qualified according to this condition is contrary to Morality [emphasis added]."⁴ Hume was equally certain: "The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation [emphasis added]."⁵ One final monist example is J. S. Mill: "Happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct [emphasis added]."⁶ And so, we have three ethical theories, each purporting to be the one right way for determining moral truth, i.e., in deciding which moral directive to accept and act upon.

It is well known that ethical theories can conflict with one another. It is equally well known that a given ethical theory can exhibit internal contradictions. Our inability as moral philosophers to resolve these conflicts and contradictions in any final sense should be convincing evidence that a monist approach to ethical theory is false—it will not lead to ultimate truth. Please note that I do not belittle the motivation, ingenuity, or intellectual depth of monist attempts. We need monist ethical theories to understand the range of possibilities available for moral decision-making. We could not, for example, carry out the above meta-ethic program without ethical theories as candidate justifications for specific moral judgements. But we must beware of the siren of sureness blinding us to alternative ethical theories that might be more appropriate applications in specific circumstances. To reinforce this caution, we turn now to three examples from applied ethics.

In business ethics the issue of profit is an important moral focus. There are those who argue that maximizing profit is the sole moral responsibility of business and that the application of any non-egoistic ethical theory is inappropriate. We can recognize this view as the monistic proposal that moral egoism is the one right way for business. (I am here including egoism as an example of an ethical theory, without

prejudging the morality of egoistic behavior.) Other ethical views are possible and at least equally appropriate in business. For example, a stakeholder theory based on the intrinsic human worth of all stakeholders in the business (customers, employees, suppliers, managers, stockholders, and the community) is a reasonable ethical theory, but contrary to business egoism. Referring back to our third meta-ethical principle (moral judgement backed by an ethical theory), we have two alternative covering theories for deciding moral correctness in business. Such a contradiction should not surprise us and does not in itself invalidate either monist theory. They both compete for moral dominance in specific applications. Ultimately, of course, we consult our developed moral sense to determine in which moral direction to proceed—a reflection of the second (moral sense) and fourth (qualified moral attitude) meta-ethical principles. The lesson that I wish to draw from this example in applied ethics is that monist ethical theories often conflict and that, when they do, we must consult our moral sense to determine what is the dominant value for us, the moral decision maker, in this situation. This reality of applying conflicting, but still monist, ethical theories must provide a caution for any monist ethic. Please note that I am not here asserting that our moral situations determine what is right. Clearly, circumstances of situation are important to clarifying moral choices for us but, under our first meta-ethical principle (fact vs. value), situations alone cannot determine the morally correct decision.

In medical ethics there is currently significant moral controversy concerning physician-assisted suicide. An important ethical theory involved in this issue is the communitarian view that it is repugnant to the field of medicine to fail to make heroic effort to continue life, whatever its quality. This ethic is reinforced by a Kantian ethic that concerns the intrinsic worth of a human life: not even the owner of that life should use it as a means to escape discomfort or pain. Life must be treated as an end in itself. But there is an opposing, and, as it turns out, equally Kantian ethical principle. Kant's "universal legislative will" of personal autonomy supports the moral choice of suicide. Here we have an instance of a monist ethic in contradiction with itself—it sanctions as moral both the selection and avoidance of suicide. This practical reality (and difficulty) with the issue of physician-assisted suicide also should provide a caution for every monist ethic. In such cases of internal contradiction, the moral decision maker may consider alternative values or pursue further intellectual inquiry. The decision maker ultimately will resolve the conflict using a developed moral sense, which perceives a dominant value in the situation. In a situation of an eighty-seven-year-old man who does not want to face life on a respirator, we may perceive his personal autonomy as the dominant value. In the case of an eighteen-year-old girl who wants to die because of rejection by a boyfriend, we may choose life continuation, not personal autonomy, as the dominant value.

A final example from applied ethics involves the application of utilitarianism to environmental issues. Consider the issue of clear-cutting old growth forest in northwest Washington State. We can proceed with a utility calculation that is based, not on Mill's attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain, but rather on economic value, i.e., dollars. The economic value of the sequoia and Douglas fir to the forest owner and to the surrounding logging communities is billions of dollars. What is the environmental value of one of the last old growth forests in North America? Perhaps it has economic potential from eco-tourism. Perhaps it has an instrumental value that can be translated into dollars for protecting the area from disastrous flooding. Nonetheless, the economic values of logging will almost always dominate the economic value of environmental interests. The monist theory of always choosing the alternative action that has the maximum net expected utility fails us here—at least it fails us if we wish (as I do) to accord some moral value to eco-systems, to the earth's biosphere, and to an intrinsic value for living and non-living environmental features. The monist theory of utility fails for three reasons: it denies any significant competing non-monetary value to environmental features, it violates the first meta-ethical principle (fact vs. value: dollar amounts are merely factual and do not, in themselves, provide any moral value), and it is hopelessly anthropocentric. When it comes to the environment, we need an ethic that is not based solely on human needs or even on human interests. There are two lessons from this area of applied ethics for monist ethics. First, develop new ethical theories that are not necessarily extensions of old anthropocentric ethics. Second, recognize that moral decision-making concerning the environment (and, I would argue, all other areas of human moral decision-making) will usually employ a panoply of ethical theories.

These three examples from applied ethics contain at least five lessons for ethical monism, i.e., for theoretical ethics. First, do not be surprised that ethical principles can conflict. This conflict is not necessarily a sign of moral weakness or of intellectual inadequacy on the part of any specific monist ethic. Rather it is a sign that the human condition, and particularly its moral dimension, is complex. Our moral decision-making is best informed when we consult a range of ethical theories before we settle on what we consider to be the morally correct decision. Second, monist ethical theories may need to be modified (recall the move in the last forty years from act utility to rule utility theories) in order to be morally and intellectually satisfactory. Third, not all monist theories will appropriately apply to specific moral decision-making

situations—we may not find a relevant justification for any alternative moral decision from a given monist theory. (Set that theory aside for now, but recall it when the next moral crisis arrives.) Fourth, our qualified moral attitude may lead us to choose one monist theory over others that also apply to a particular situation. And fifth, we need richness and a fertile continuing development of ethical theories (perhaps monist) to aid our moral decision-making in novel situations, for example in the developing area of environmental ethics. (The clear possibility of life on planets other than earth would require a "Copernican Revolution" in monist ethical theories—get ready!)

There are also at least two lessons from meta-ethics and normative ethical theory for applied ethics. First, it is absolutely essential that moral judgements in application areas proceed partially on the basis of reference to ethical theories, monist or not. Without such guideposts, moral judgements are merely the expression of personal opinion with little to support them rationally. Second, it is the hallmark of applied ethics that clearly applicable ethical theories often provide conflicting moral guidance. We can only resolve these conflicts (and in application we must resolve them) by close attention to the logical connection between ethical theory and alternative moral judgements and by consulting a developed moral sense.

We can now summarize our conclusions. The legitimacy of moral decision making requires four things: (1) value, not just fact; (2) a developed moral sense to detect competing values; (3) a reference to one or more clearly applicable ethical theories that may conflict; and, (4) a consultation of the urge to action (a qualified moral attitude) that identifies for us the dominant values in a moral decision making situation.

It might appear, albeit incorrectly, that the moral pluralist position outlined here has as its ultimate outcome moral relativism. I take the essence of moral relativism to be that human culture defines what is morally right. The views here are clearly in conflict with relativism: moral decision-making depends upon reference to ethical theories (which currently are mostly monist) that apply across cultures. Indeed, I would argue that ethical theory defines a culture, rather than the reverse.

It might further appear that the moral pluralist position outlined here results ultimately in moral nihilism or in a post-modern moral subjectivity. Nothing could be further from the case. While our meta-ethics does recognize a moral sense as an essential ingredient of decision-making, all moral senses are not equally valid. It is the claim of equal validity (and so, no validity at all) that I take to be the essence of postmodern moral subjectivity. Those senses that are not based on reference to a normative ethical theory are merely moral opinions that are hopelessly subjective. But when we judge that another person's decision is immoral, we are implicitly recognizing that this person has selected an ethical theory to justify what they sense to be a dominant value in the situation. We are saying further that our dominant value, and its supporting monist ethical theory, is being rejected. Nothing more, nothing less. Different situations also may cause us to shift what we consider to be the dominant moral value. This is not subjectivity either; rather it is a recognition that moral decision-making is a complex human enterprise and that we appropriately make different moral choices in different situations.

Those developed moral senses, which are fully informed about the range of ethical theories that appropriately apply to a particular situation, are not subjective. Recall the meta-ethic of fact and value-objectivity derives in both dimensions by reference to an overriding theory. Judgements achieve their moral objectivity from reasoning about the application of ethical theories to a particular situation. We must, of course, then make our own moral decisions.

There are clear challenges for normative ethical theory: enrich your theories and construct a multi-dimensional ethic that can apply in as broad a context as possible. The best moral decision occurs, although perhaps not frequently, when all (or most) monist theories recommend the same alternative action.

ENDNOTES:

1. Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 242 et seq.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 246.
4. Immanuel Kant, *General Introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals*, part IV.
5. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I, para. 239.
6. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 4. Acknowledgements: I am indebted to my colleague, Prof. Nils

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