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Consider Ethics
Theory, Readings and Contemporary Issues

Bruce N. Waller

Third Edition

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Credits

Jeremy Bentham, "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation."

John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism"

Bernard Williams, excerpt from "A Critique of Utilitarianism," from J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). pp. 97–100, 101–104.

Glossary

Act-utilitarianism: A version of utilitarian ethics in which the rightness or wrongness of all acts is judged by whether they maximize pleasure and minimize suffering.

Consequentialism: Any ethical theory that judges the rightness or wrongness of an act on the basis of its consequences, rather than on the basis of what principle the act falls under; contrasted with *deontological* ethics.

Egoism: *See* Ethical egoism; Psychological egoism.

Satisficing consequentialism: A version of consequentialist ethics that holds that an act can be good *enough*—can produce ethically satisfactory results—even if it does not produce the best possible consequences.

Utilitarian ethics: The ethical theory that judges the rightness or wrongness of an act in terms of its consequences—in particular, whether it produces the greatest balance of pleasure over suffering for everyone involved.

Pluralism and Pragmatism

Value Pluralism

What is *the* good? What is *the* proper path, the good life, for human beings? What is *the* basic virtue, the *supreme* good, the *summum bonum*, that should guide all our ethical decision making? Philosophers have given a wide variety of answers to those questions. Plato argued that *justice* is the highest good; Aristotle insisted that the life of intellectual virtue is the highest good for humankind; Kant insisted that *the* overriding ethical principle is to follow the *categorical imperative*; for Bentham, the good is striving to produce the greatest balance of pleasure over pain for all. Those, of course, are widely divergent answers. But their enormous differences notwithstanding, they all *agree* on a basic ethical assumption: there is *one* unified overall fundamental good, and that good should organize and direct all our ethical considerations.

That has seemed a natural enough assumption to most philosophers: whatever ethical system we favor, it must be one that is *unified* by a *single* overarching principle, goal, or good. Plato insists that the unifying good is *justice*, Aristotle claims it is *intellectual virtue*, Bentham that the basic good is maximizing the balance of pleasure over suffering, and Nietzsche that we should create a higher being (the Superman or *ubermensch*). But all agree that the goal must be singular and unitary, a goal or end that unites all our ethical considerations into an ordered system. But natural as that assumption may have been to most ethicists, is it a justified assumption?

> There is really no more ground for supposing that all our demands can be accounted for by one universal underlying kind of motive than there is ground for supposing that all physical phenomena are cases of a single law. The elementary forces in ethics are probably as plural as those of physics are. The various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic [ethical] scale. *William James,* The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life, *1891.*

There must be a *truth* to ethics, and that means ultimately a unified whole: that was the basic idea behind the common belief in ethical *monism*, behind the belief that there must be a single unifying ethical value. If biology holds a theory that is in conflict with geology, and both are in conflict with physics, then something is *wrong*. In the late nineteenth century, Darwinian biologists insisted that the evolutionary process required hundreds of millions of years; physicists and astronomers insisted that the Earth could not

be more than a few million years old (because the Sun would have burned out if it had been burning much longer than that). Both of those views could *not* be right: there cannot be one truth for biologists and a conflicting truth for astronomers and physicists. (The conflict was resolved by the discovery of atomic energy, which explained how a small star could continue releasing enormous amounts of energy for billions of years without burning out). The same idea appeals to ethicists: if there is an ethical *truth*, it must be *unified*: just as the Earth cannot be billions of years old for biologists, and much younger for physicists, so something cannot be the supreme good for you and a less significant good for me; instead, there must be *one* unifying good.

There are, however, dissenters to this ethical orthodoxy. *Value pluralism* (sometimes called ethical pluralism or moral pluralism) is the view that values do *not* have such a unified order: There are multiple values, all of them legitimate and genuine values, they may sometimes be in conflict, and there is no objective way of placing those multiple values in rank order. (In a monarchy, there may be many distinct members of the nobility: the king and queen, the dukes, the earls, the knights, and so on. But there is no question about the *order* of the nobility, with the king and queen at the top. For value pluralists, no such top to bottom ordering is possible among our various values: even *if* it is clear that some values take precedence over others, there are still conflicts among values where no objective ordering is possible.) On the value pluralist view, there are many distinct and different values, and no *supreme* value that orders them all. Or another way of thinking of this: those who favor a unified theory of value may believe that there are many different values, but they all share some defining property (they are all approved by God, they all increase happiness and diminish suffering, or they all contribute to wisdom), whereas value *pluralists* would insist that there is no property that these diverse values have in common, no unifying characteristic.

Value pluralism is a theory about the nature of ethics (values are irreducibly pluralistic); it is *not* the same as *political* pluralism. Political pluralism is the view that citizens of a state should be free to pursue their own values, so long as they do not harm or interfere with other citizens. I may (with Aristotle) reject value pluralism and maintain that the only genuinely good life for humans is one of intellectual virtue, and that pursuit of wisdom is the supreme value; but as a political pluralist, I also hold that you should be free to pursue your own goals and values (goals and values that I regard as *mistaken*), and that the state should not take sides on which personal values are correct. Likewise, I may believe that my religion is the only true religion, yet—as a *political* pluralist—believe that the state should not show preference toward any religion.

Consider a possible example of *value* pluralism. You and I both value liberty, and we both value equal opportunity (if you don't, pretend for a moment that you do). George and Martha are quite wealthy (perhaps you have doubts that their accumulation of wealth is morally legitimate: set that issue aside for the moment). They should have the *liberty* to use their resources as they wish, and they choose to invest a substantial portion of those resources in the education of their daughter, Beverly. They hire tutors to teach Beverly languages at an early age when children are very receptive to learning new languages; they take her on world tours; they hire excellent tutors to help her overcome her early reading problems, and she develops into an excellent reader; they make tutors available for every subject she studies; they send her to the finest and most expensive prep school, where none of her classes have more than a dozen students and she has a full range of AP courses; they spend thousands of dollars on prep courses for her SAT exams. Beverly excels in her studies, makes a splendid SAT score, goes to a top college (her parents happily pay the enormous tuition), and—with this wonderfully advantageous start—goes on to a very successful career. Robert and Alice also have a daughter, Carolyn; but Robert and Alice have little money, both must work to make ends meet, and though they dearly love Carolyn and deeply desire to give her every opportunity, they do not have the resources to provide Carolyn with the special academic advantages enjoyed by Beverly. Carolyn has no tutors, learns no languages; she goes to a large public school that is short on resources, has crowded classrooms and large classes with little individual attention. Carolyn was a good reader in her early years—in fact, considerably better than Beverly at the same age—but with only mediocre reading classes and few books available, Carolyn soon falls behind Beverly in this important area. Carolyn's school has few AP courses, and no tutoring for those courses; and Carolyn's family cannot afford expensive SAT prep courses, much less the high tuition of Beverly's college.

Obviously, Beverly and Carolyn do *not* enjoy equal opportunities. Of course Carolyn may nonetheless go on to a very successful career: many students who start with such disadvantages do manage to overcome

them (Supreme Court Justice Sotomayer is a shining example). So, clearly Carolyn does have *some* opportunity; but it would be absurd to suggest that Beverly and Carolyn have *equal* opportunity. Obviously, Carolyn's school should be improved, and (if we *really* believe in equal opportunity) more resources should be devoted to providing a better educational opportunity for Carolyn and her classmates. But we will never have enough resources to provide *all* students with the extraordinary advantages enjoyed by Beverly. Ultimately, the only way we could insure that Beverly and Carolyn have *equal* opportunity is by restricting the resources that George and Martha can devote to Beverly's education; but that would be a restriction on the *liberty* of George and Martha to use their resources as they choose. So this is a genuine conflict among genuine values: a conflict that value pluralists believe cannot be objectively settled. (Of course there might be further debate, even among value pluralists, about whether the equal opportunity/liberty debate is a value conflict that cannot be resolved; for example, some argue that equal opportunity is essential for genuine liberty, and so it must be given precedence even by those—perhaps especially by those—who genuinely value liberty. But value pluralists would still insist that there are at least some conflicts between genuine values that cannot be resolved by such ordering.)

Value pluralism is *not* the view that we simply do not *know* the right order of competing values; rather, value pluralists maintain that there is no *supreme* good to know: there are instead many goods, with no clear order among them. Also, value pluralism is not a nonobjectivist view: pluralists can maintain that the various goods are genuine objective goods (though pluralists *may* also be *non*objectivists); however, they insist that there is no objective way of placing all those goods in rank order. (That's not to say that there is *no* rank ordering. My going to a concert may be a good thing, but it is *not* worth running over a crowd of pedestrians in order to get there: preserving the lives of pedestrians is more valuable than my presence at a concert. But if we are instead considering the relative values of equality of opportunity and liberty, the rank ordering may be more difficult; and according to value pluralists, there may be *no* objective way of ordering those values.)

Is there an irreducible plurality of goods? Judith Jarvis Thomson argues that there is, insisting that there are *many* ways of being good, and that those ways do not have a common property. Deborah is a good mother, a good friend, a good soldier, and a good judge; but it is difficult to imagine a "quality of goodness" that makes Deborah *good* in all those distinctive roles. Friendship is a good, along with courage, and open-mindedness, and integrity. But is there a good-making quality common to them all? In some cases, friendship may be threatened by a commitment to integrity; and if that is the case, that raises doubts that they can both be explained by one principle of goodness.

Bernard Williams offers another argument for value pluralism: the argument from regret. You are a very talented violinist, but also very good at biology. You love playing the violin, and you are certain there is genuine value in playing beautiful music and enriching the lives of those who hear you perform; but you are also sure that you would find great satisfaction as a physician, relieving the suffering of those whom you treat. Both careers are very demanding, and you cannot choose both: the demands of medical school and medical practice would not allow you to devote the many hours of practice required to play at the level of a concert violinist. You choose a career as a physician, and you find it worthwhile and satisfying, and you believe you made the right choice, the *better* choice; nonetheless, you occasionally feel a *reasonable* regret that you could not pursue the good of a career as concert violinist. But if good is a unitary whole, such regret would *not* be reasonable: you are confident you made the right choice, and if good is all one, that implies you chose the *greater* good, and it would be unreasonable to *regret* choosing the greater good over the lesser. But your regret *does* seem reasonable—and the most plausible explanation of the reasonableness of that regret is that your choice of a medical career required giving up a *different type* of good, rather than a lesser quantity of general unitary good.

Value pluralism makes ethical judgments more difficult: if there are fundamentally different values—a plurality of values that cannot be placed on a single scale or measured by a single standard—then how can we tell when our value choices are correct? "Always act so as to produce the greatest balance of pleasure over pain." Trying to follow that utilitarian standard is difficult: it is very difficult to determine the larger effects of our acts and policies. But at least utilitarians have a single scale by which to measure all value judgments. For value pluralists, there is no such scale: in trying to choose between loyalty to a friend and commitment to integrity, there may be no workable scale on which to weigh those very different values,

and thus there may be no way of being certain we have made the right decision. For value pluralists, ethics is not as neat and measurable as it is for Kantians, utilitarians, or contract theorists. While value *monists* would regard that as a flaw in value pluralism, value pluralists regard it as a more realistic approach to ethics: ethical decision making is *not* (value pluralists sometimes claim) as clear, precise, and easy as ethical theories often imply; instead, ethics is a complex and confusing business, replete with uncertainty and complexity and loose ends.

Do Ethical Obligations Always Come First?

Value pluralists insist that there are multiple values that cannot be measured by a single standard, and thus no decision procedure can be devised that will yield definitive answers about which ethical values should take precedence. But even if we could be clear about our single unitary definitive ethical obligation, there would still be another question: must ethical obligations always take precedence over other interests and goals and goods? In one sense, of course, it is obvious that we always *should* follow our ethical obligation: it is part of the meaning of ethical obligation that you *should* fulfill the obligation. "You ought to keep your promise, but you shouldn't do so." That sounds like nonsense. Of course, one can sensibly say: "You ought to keep your promise, but I *hope* you do not" (you might reasonably say that, for example, if you have learned that your lover has made a promise to meet an old flame for lunch). But the *nature* of ethical obligations is that you *should* fulfill them if you can do so. If Judith says, "I have an ethical obligation to help Allen, but I should not help Allen," then we are justified in concluding that either Judith does not genuinely believe she has an ethical obligation, or that she does not understand the meaning of an ethical obligation. But one *could* say without confusion or misunderstanding: I believe we do have ethical obligations, but I don't believe it is a good idea to always give ethical obligations priority; sometimes life goes better (not *ethically* better, but richer and more satisfying) if we allow other interests and goals to trump our ethical obligations.

Must ethical obligations always take precedence over other interests and goods? Perhaps, ethically speaking, they *should*. But is a life dominated by ethical considerations really the best possible life for humans like ourselves? Before answering that question, it is important to consider what the demands of ethics *are*; and those demands will vary significantly, depending on the account of ethics one holds. If you are a social contract theorist, you probably see the demands of ethics as only moderately burdensome: don't harm others, and follow the basic laws agreed to by the contracting parties. On the other hand, if you are a utilitarian, your ethical system makes much more stringent and comprehensive demands upon you. Indeed, the demands of utilitarian ethics seem to encompass every choice you make, for utilitarian ethics requires that you *always* act in a manner that will produce the greatest balance of pleasure over suffering for everyone. A night at the movies may well give you pleasure, but does it produce the maximum balance of pleasure over suffering for everyone? Couldn't you better use the time spent at the movies to tutor a child who needs help with his early reading skills (wouldn't that be more likely to produce a better overall long-term balance of pleasure over suffering)? And the money spent for movie tickets and popcorn: aren't you obligated, as a good utilitarian, to contribute that money for famine relief? Even if you favor some less demanding ethical theory than classical utilitarianism, the demands of your ethical system are likely to be quite strong. After all, we live in a world in which there is massive poverty, widespread starvation, terrible sickness; and everyday you spend money on inessential goods—a soda or a beer, movie tickets or tennis balls, a new sweater or a magazine—and that money could be used to save the life of someone suffering from starvation or disease in an impoverished country. Most ethical systems would insist that you have an obligation to save another human life when your choice is between saving a life and purchasing a luxury item.

One response to such strong ethical demands is to reject the ethical system that makes those demands: You might favor some ethical theory that makes more modest demands, such as social contract ethics. But there is another alternative: you might conclude that the demands of ethics *are* very strong, but that ethical demands need not always come first. The latter position does not *reject* ethics or its demands—it treats ethical values and ethical obligations as genuine—but it counsels that a full rich human life may include interests and goals that sometimes take precedence over ethical demands and concerns. On this view, ethics remains very important (a life devoid of ethical considerations would be a very poor life indeed); but ethical obligations need not *always* be the *most* important considerations. In the readings

which follow, Susan Wolf argues not only that it is legitimate for other considerations to sometimes override ethical obligations; in fact, Wolf maintains that the most satisfactory human life must involve goals and interests that do not always give way before ethical obligations: "I believe that moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive." Wolf maintains that invariably following the full demands of morality—or always striving for the best possible moral act—would leave us with sadly impoverished lives. Wolf concludes that moral considerations are very important, and perhaps the *most* important elements in living a good life; but they are not the only considerations, and it is quite legitimate, even desirable, to give other considerations and interests room to flourish. As Wolf puts it, there are strong grounds for doubting "the assumption that it is always better to be morally better."

Susan Wolf's view is not without its challengers, of course. Catherine Wilson argues that Wolf's perspective makes us too comfortable with the prevailing standards of our culture of privilege and consumption, and too comfortable with our disproportionate consumption of the world's resources in pursuit of our interests and pleasures. Wilson maintains that Wolf's picture makes the goals and values common in our culture look somewhat more innocent and morally justifiable than they actually are. The question that Wilson brings into focus is the distinction between what is purely a matter of private preference and what is properly within the sphere of public moral concern. Wolf is worried that moral demands might impoverish our private lives and choices, while Wilson notes that our "private choices" may have significant impact on others: particularly if those private choices are purchased at the price of overconsumption of the world's limited resources, support of a world economic system that privileges a few and deprives many, and production of pollution that threatens the well-being of everyone (especially the least privileged).

The demands of morality, and the proper place of those demands, raise difficult issues. Few people will favor an ethics requiring that we sacrifice all feelings, concerns, and interests on the altar of moral principle. On the other hand, if moral behavior seems *too* easy, that might be cause for self-examination. Perhaps you have reached the exalted level of Aristotle's perfectly virtuous person: you have become so thoroughly habituated to doing good acts that you always desire to do what is right. But if you doubt that your moral life has reached such Olympian heights, yet you never feel that the demands of ethics are a bit burdensome, then perhaps you are not giving moral considerations sufficient attention.

Pluralism and Pragmatism

Pluralists are open to a multiplicity of values, and *pragmatists* favor the testing of various value systems and are ready to consider new approaches to ethics; so there is some natural affinity between the positions. But that affinity should not be overstated. Their common ground notwithstanding, pluralists need not be pragmatists, and pragmatists can certainly reject ethical pluralism. Pragmatists are committed to an *experimental* approach to ethics, in an effort to discover what ethical system works best for human animals. But a pragmatist might believe that her experimental process has yielded a single dominant value as the most plausible and thus reject value pluralism. And from the other side, a value pluralist might believe that there are well-established values, fixed values that are known with certainty, and that because those pluralist values are clearly known, no pragmatic experimentation with values is either needed or justified. So whatever connections we might find among some value pluralists and some ethical pragmatists, we should keep in mind that these are still different and distinct approaches to ethics.

Pragmatism

Pragmatists believe that moral principles may indeed be *true*, just as true as scientific principles. But pragmatists insist that our traditional notion of *truth*—in philosophy and ethics as well as in science—is hopelessly muddled. According to the traditional account of truth, a claim is true when it corresponds to reality. Is the Copernican theory true? The traditional correspondence theory of truth counts the theory as true just in case it corresponds to or matches or copies the way the world actually is. The Copernican theory asserts that the Earth orbits the Sun; that theory is true (according to the correspondence account) just in case the Copernican theory corresponds to or maps or copies the planetary reality.